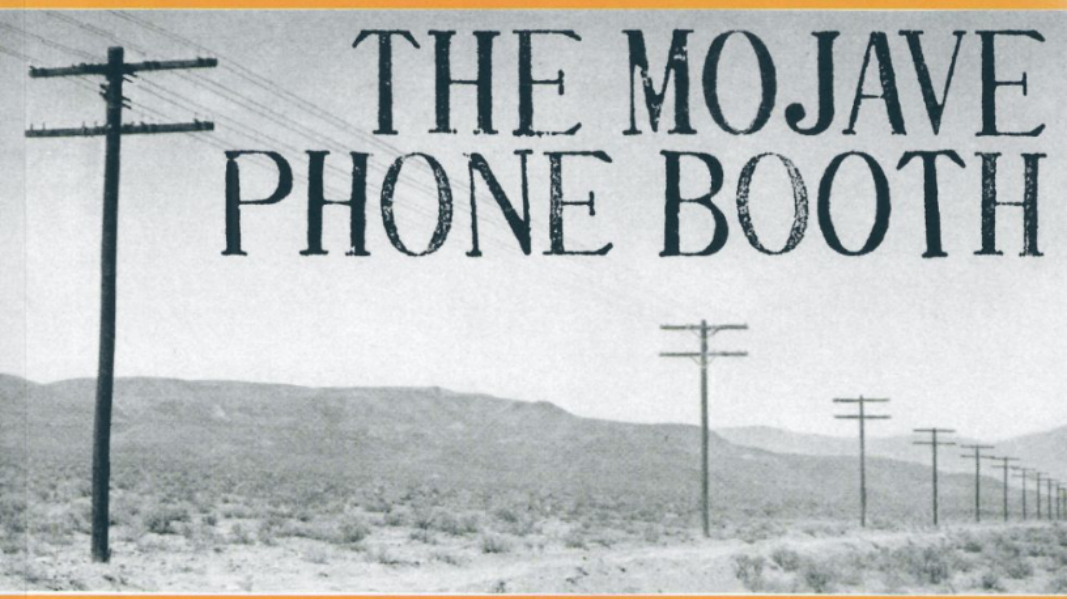
A Work of Modern Cross-Cultural Narrative Folklore (and "Strangely Poetic Business") That Happens Also to Be More or Less Actually True

ADVENTURES WITH THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH



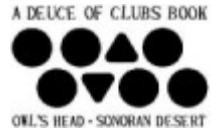
GODFREY "DOC" DANIELS

ADVENTURES WITH THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH

ADVENTURES WITH THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH

A Work
of
Modern Cross-Cultural Narrative Folklore
That Happens Also to Be
More or Less
Actually
True

BY
GODFREY "DOC" DANIELS



© Godfrey Daniels 2018

A DEUCE OF CLUBS BOOK

OWL'S HEAD - SONORAN DESERT

Visit DeuceOfClubs.com and MojavePhoneBooth.com

Send comments, questions, &c. to:doc@MojavePhoneBoothBook.com

This book about adventures, unanticipated connections, and unforeseen consequences is dedicated to my friend Lisa U., who won't know until she reads this that a connection she made for me long ago started a chain of events that made possible every adventure described herein (and so much more). Muchisimas gracias, mi amiga.

It is astonishing how much enjoyment can be gotten out of life when people set about the task in dead earnest.

- Captain John G. Bourke, U.S. Cavalry, Arizona Territory, 1891

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: A NEW DESERT MADNESS

GIRL TROUBLE

THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH PROJECT
- "Nobody Calls Out Here!"...
- "Hello?" A Pointless Exercise in Telephony...

BOOTHFARI: OR THE QUEST TO...WAIT, YOUR'RE GONNA DO *WHAT*, NOW?
- "Huh."...
- Cima Exit...
- I'm In A Phone Booth, Baby...
- You Never Know What's Going To Happen When The Phone Rings...

BOOTHOGRAPHY I: A PHONE AMONG THE CINDER CONES

SOMETHING-OR-OTHER CALLETH UNTO SOMETHING ELSE
- This Way To The Gateway, Ladies And Gentlemen...
- "In The Flux Of Desert Darkness"...
- Morning Mood...
- "Strike That, Reverse It."...
- On The Hook...

REACTION: "TOO MUCH TIME ON YOUR HANDS"

FAME: THE BOOTH SCORES A MEDIA HIT

BOOTHOGRAPHY II: LOCAL REACTION

SPAWNING A SCARY TRIBE
- Onward And Boothwa-...Oh Crap...
- Booth Party...

BOOTHOGRAPHY III: THE RAY FAMILY AND THE BIRTH OF THE BOOTH

WORLD WIDE BOOTH

BOOTH BLIZZARD: CHEAP THRILLS, FREE CHILLS
Alone At The Booth...
Cold Conclave...
Blizzard...
Whiskey Pete's Death Car...
Rocket Winter...

MEDIA BLIZZARD
From "Get A Life!" To "Gimme Directions!"

BOOTHOGRAPHY IV: POPULARITY

"LIVES WILL BE CHANGED BECAUSE OF THIS, YOU KNOW

GET A LIFE VS. GET A CLUE: BOOTH REACTIONS AND REPERCUSSIONS

CONSEQUENCES OF THE MEDIA BLIZZARD: BUREAUCRATS VS. THE CIMA MINE
This Land Is Whose Land? Or, All Your Mine: Are Belong To Us...

BOOTHOGRAPHY V: LOCAL BOOTH MEMORIES

THEN THE DEVIL IS SIX: THE BOOTH GETS RELIGION (OR VICE VERSA)

BOOTHOGRAPHY VI: THAT FIRST CALL

VISIT NO. 7: THE PHANTOM VISIT
"I Promise I'll Be Cool"...
Hoaxing Time?...
"Are The Other Godfreys Dentists?"...
Boothquake!...
Booth Vandalism...
Networking...

NICK'S SECRET

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY
An Ominous Warning...

THE END OF THE BOOTH
Disbelief And Doubt...
Confirmation...
Ray Family Reaction...

Pacific Bell Worker Bees...
Speaking Of Artifacts...
Quite Contrary...
National Park, International Incident...
Reaction Across The Internet...
New Lies...
Comparative Cases...
Break Up The Concrete...
Why The Dick Move, Mary?...
Theft Of The Booth's Companion Phone Booth...
What Did The NPS Do With The Mojave Phone Booth?...
Booth Redivivus?...
The Self-Pumpkinifation Of The NPS...

AFTERMATH
Presumptions Of Guilt...
A World Without The Booth...
Continuing Inspiration Of The Booth...

WHY A BOOTH?
Adventure...
Connection...

Adventures with the Mojave Phone Booth was made possible with the generous assistance (and damn near infinite patience) of its kind Kickstarter backers:

Putchfilms, Sean Anklam, Maegan K, Robb Leatherwood, Douglas, Shaun, someone who identified himself as Sergeant Zeno from the Pentagon, Mari Morton, Jean Howery, John Calhoun, Marie Meadows, Kris Sherman, Whitney Hanson,John, lbjamison, Carolee, Andrew Lenards, Michael Lujan, Elizabeth Butters, Juan Martinez, Heather McGee, April Starr-Rood, Vance Dubberly, Molly Rogers, Ernie Longmire, David Singyke, Andra Fiegel and Jada White, Oliver Hennig, Tyler Heibeck, Mark A. Thomas, Guy Starbuck, Todd Fusilli, Cliff Davis, Kathy Biehl, Chai Guy, Alison Deline, Nick Price, Steve Courtney, Allison Lowe, Lauren 'o shazbor' Rosenthal, John Binns, Lucky, Kimberly Reid, Adam Davis, Dan,Jess Zimmerman, Thick Bottom Tacos, Chris Atkinson, Larry Mollica, Jen Garuti,Jason S., Steven Tillinghast, Ken Layne, Greg Thomas, Tim Fross, Dan Shick, Everfalling, It's Not, Chris Eldred, RJ Lacino, Molly Kiely, ogbfind, Craig Rachel, Rob Vincent, Bratty Man, marissaland, Greg Wojtusiak, TW Hansen, Maylene White, Whitney Anderson, Suzie Strong, Colleena Sabatino, Cythia, Jim Sanger, Kerry, Sean Stewart, MyzMonika, Michael Wertz, Amy Nichols, Diane, Erik Iversen, Douglas Berdaux, Jan Switzer, Ross Sieber, Danielle Brandon, Stephen Bluto, Gillian Andrews, Les Hostetler, Tommy Duvall, Catherine Girod, Christopher J Dennis, Lauren M, Brad Carter, Phil Hain, Nicolas Peterson, Megan, Sierk Poetting, Earthtopus, Felicia Yonter, Cody Gardner, Rand al'Thor,Jerry Cuevas Jr., Christopher Davis, Alistair Hedge, Tony Bautts, Matt, Jordan White, Patti Phillips, Jerry Relth, Matt Maxwell, Tim Klein, amberh, Eric Nystrom, Spencer McCall, Phillip Ginder, Steve Mieczkowski, Mary Mahood, Jon Sarriugare & Kyrsten Mate, Nicole Panter, Chris Jervis, Jim Donavitz, Troy Fuss, Lawrence Frigon, Heather Vescent, Benjamin Hard, Randy Snow, Laura L. Griffin, Bill Hartman, Garrick, David Mertl, lrkm13, Kay McKistry, Preston Broussard, Kurt Latham, Ken Duffy, Kelly Dillon, Tricia Dove, Simon, Jane Maru, RadHaus US, Lance Adams, Siobhan McAlpin, Marin Mairinger, Justin Park, John Kinison, Peterpan, Greg D'Avis, Richard Hanisch, Greg Knauss, Tod Weitzel, Adam Kempa, Peter, Auburn Sheaffer Sandstrom, Larry Hosken, KoboldPrime, Adam Fine, Leah Cannon, Kendall West, ydaraishy, Sean Weitzel, Wendy Star Moore, Sean Engard, Sandra Sirnweis, Morgan Hay, B. A. Crumm, Carol Boumiea, Tristan Horn, Ditzyhorse, Kapil Sharma, and Lynda Lanford

Thank you all!
GD

INTRODUCTION:
A NEW DESERT MADNESS

> Is there anything in the world so thrilling as mere
> direction purposely undertaken and steadily pursued?
> -Zephine Humphrey, *Cactus Forest* (1938)

People are led into the desert by a variety of madnesses.

Given even half a chance, most sensible folks will be happy to repeat some version of that judgment right into one's face.

Will they *ever.*

In 1997, I made known to a small circle of friends and acquaintances my bare-bones, barely brewed plan to wander deep into the Mojave Desert in search of an isolated telephone booth I'd heard of, miles from the nearest pavement, that I thought I was pretty sure might actually exist out there, somewhere, probably. Maybe.

If that isn't half a chance, I don't know what is, and certain of my more sensible friends took full advantage of it. But I wasn't thinking about their scoldings as my pal Professor Cardyhouse and I found ourselves bouncing and rattling along through the scorching August twilight in a rented van down a rough dirt road atop Cima Dome, southeast of Death Valley, about 80 miles west of Las Vegas. Part of the Cima Volcanic Range, Cima Dome is a rounded, 75-square-mile granite formation, a giant mass of solidified magma that once sat deep underground beneath an ancient volcano that weathered away ages ago.

Humans have meandered over the surface of Cima Dome for thousands of years, for what I'm sure always seemed at the time to be perfectly good reasons (except to any sensible friends they might happen to have had). My own good reason, second-guessed by many, was of a do-it-yourself nature. DIY was at the heart of this entire undertaking. I had met Professor Cardyhouse after we began swapping our *zines* - homemade DIY magazines - through the mail. I would send issues of my zine, featuring a 12-inch tall statue of the composer Wagner, to the Professor in exchange for issues of his zine called *X Magazine*, whose subtitle was "Humor and/or Music." It was by way of another zine, *Wig Out!*, that I had first heard of the rumored existence of this phone booth in the Mojave, which had spurred me to embark upon a venture I named The Mojave Phone Booth Project, which in due course had given rise to our expedition into the Mojave Desert.

Small numbers of people still wander around Cima Dome, but probably no one who ever snaked a vehicle along dusty Aiken Mine Road paid much notice when they saw the trail merge with a line of utility poles from the northern horizon, leading to the crest of each successive hill, all the way to the southern horizon. Contemporary desert explorers are mostly desensitized to the surprisingly common desert blight of intruding utility poles, which in a desert wilderness do little other than spoil the view. I mean, cities at least get some utility out of the poles, which all your better guide books will tell you is pretty much the point of utility poles, whereas in open desert it's typically all pole, no utility. The poles are permanent transplants, but the power and communications they carry are similar to most travelers who speed along Interstate 15 between Los Angeles and Las Vegas - just passing through, crossing the desert only by necessity on the way to their real destinations. A lot of human travelers almost rival wooden poles in their lack of capacity to notice and appreciate the magnificent basin-and-range topography of these wide expanses. Desert lovers, faced with intrusions by city equipment, just try to ignore them as best they can.

Professor Cardyhouse and I, however, did not ignore that line of utility poles paralleling Aiken Mine Road. Not that day. Because those utility poles were telephone poles.

Maybe you don't get odd ideas or do odd things (as far as you're aware, anyway - I mean, you have just begun to read an entire non-fiction book about a telephone booth) but if you are the sort of person who gets odd ideas or does odd things, you will have long ago concluded that your home couldn't possibly be anywhere near where the buffalo roam, because you will doubtless have heard a discouraging word the opposite of seldom times. That's especially true if any of your odd ideas has involved a desert. For thousands of years, sensible people have regarded the desert as little more than a

midwife to odd ideas. They're not entirely wrong; something like a third of this planet's inhabitants follow religions that sprang up after one person or another claimed to have heard a voice in a desert.

Yet most of my sensible friends don't find monotheism odd, or any theism odd, for that matter, provided it arose at least a thousand years ago. Nor do they think it odd for non-religious people to venture into deserts, as long as it's in pursuit of some ordinary and easily understandable goal, such as earthly wealth - real estate, for example, or oil, or gold.

To my mind it's those culturally respectable desert enthusiasms that are the sketchy ones. Most deserts are pocked with deep, dry holes that have financially drained lots of people madder for material riches than I ever was about a desert phone booth. And I could take you to plenty of desert locations where someone who thought to get rich by building a housing development managed to get only as far as installing streets and curbs and fire hydrants before running out of money. Meanwhile, preachers are happy to take up your Sunday morning praising Abraham for being all gung ho to murder his only child solely upon the say-so of a disembodied desert voice. But let a guy merely announce his idea for a desert phone booth trip involving neither money nor murders nor deaths of any kind (no planned ones, anyway) and somehow *he's* the crazy one?

Was I crazy? I didn't think so. *Focused*, I'd probably have called it at the time. (Then again, I'm one quarter Finnish, so maybe I'm susceptible to what in the Finnish language is termed *Juoksentelisinkohan*, a word that really exists, no lie, and means "I wonder if I should run around aimlessly?") Yet for me it's hard to imagine that anyone who ever moseyed off into a desert in search of either earthly wealth or heavenly wisdom can have heard more discouraging words than I had to hear regarding my seemingly harmless little plan to look for a desert phone booth.

I think we all take for granted how easy it is to take the wind out of another's sails.
- Heather McGee Lackey

Oh, but if I'd had the power to divine the future! I'd have alarmed my sensible friends even further with my wild foretellings. I'd have prophesied that within mere months of my going into the desert in search of it - and precisely *because* of its absurd remoteness - this forlorn and unsung desert artifact to which I had given the name Mojave Phone Booth would come to have friends and fans around the globe, to the extent that what had been almost certainly the world's most isolated telephone booth would be transformed almost overnight into the world's most celebrated telephone booth.

Had my friends possessed wealth equal to their scorn, I could have amassed a fortune by suckering them into placing bets against my prophecy,

because the Mojave Phone Booth *did* become world famous. And I don't mean "world famous" as in "TRY OUR WORLD-FAMOUS CHEE-ZEE STIX." I mean *world famous*, as in:

Famous. All over. The world.

Even the destruction that swiftly followed its rise to fame failed to end that fame. The Booth was given obituaries in newspapers, magazines, and TV reports worldwide. I don't know that I'll merit any obituary at all when I go, but even if I were someday able to, let's say, bring together believers in the three major monotheisms as one, in a giant accord of peace and goodwill and impossibly syncretized desert religion solid enough to abide for a millennium, I guarantee you my obituary would still mention The Mojave Phone Booth.

I quickly became identified with the Booth in ways no clairvoyance could have foreseen, to the point where, for a short while it got to be a little unsettling to be known as That Phone Booth Guy, but I eventually learned to embrace it as a distinction. After all, we humans sometimes over-celebrate our individuality. Not that there isn't something unique about each of us (if not, how would we get our mail?) but when it comes down to it, we're most of us pretty samey, really. Hell, they say we're only a few DNA percentage points away from chimps. Besides, that I would have any salutary effect at all upon strangers is more than most who have known me would ever have envisioned, so I decided it wasn't so bad to be That Guy What Accidentally Made A Phone Booth Famous. Babe Ruth took 714 home runs to the grave with him, Alexander the Great made his fevered leap into the void as master of the known world, and I am content to know that I will go to my earthly rest pulling a phone booth behind me.

Depending upon which unreliable web-based information source you distrust the least, the busiest U.S. payphone in the 1990s was located in one of three places:

- a Chicago bus terminal (if one believes some website quoting AT&T)
- New York City's Penn Station (if one believes what appears to be a defunct Knights of Columbus website)
- New York City's Grand Central Station (if one belongs to the shrinking demographic that believes newspapers).

At the height of its fame, the Mojave Phone Booth was busier than all three of those payphones put together and then some, to the extent that the ringing of its phone in the midst of an otherwise quiet desert stopped only when someone was there to answer. Improbably, almost instantly, a new desert madness had not only been spawned but also proven itself somehow communicable, spreading rapidly to people over the entire planet.

As patient zero of this new condition, I was more surprised than anyone

when callers across the globe began tapping out the number of the Booth as though sending messages into outer space. Some callers no doubt hoped for a conversation. Others were content merely to hear the line ring and know (or just believe) that somewhere in a desert wilderness a telephone was ringing just for them. In a way it resembled the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project except for being instead an entirely earthbound search for life.

Or search for a life, as my sensible friends and acquaintances saw it. Up until then, we had shared a long history of them more or less blatantly regarding me as a weirdo. They'd been mostly good-natured about it, though, so I expected them to react to my phone booth plan with the usual dismissive bemusement they always half-heartedly tried to hide whenever they allowed me to me blather at length about projects they considered "eccentric" but comparatively harmless. Not one of them had freaked out when I claimed I was going to, for example,

- cover a rickety, rusted-out, rat-crap-flled 1962 Chevy Biscayne with Herb Alpert LP record covers and drive it from Arizona to the Gulf of Mexico
- run for state legislature (under the campaign slogan *What Are You Looking At?*)
- roll a bowling ball all the way from Florence Junction to Tucson
- accost Dan Quayle repeatedly with the head of a statue of a dead composer
- join an effort to establish a human-made liberty island out on an ocean somewhere
- establish a new religion featuring imaginary planets
- pose as a think tank director and submit a mildly accusatory political liberty questionnaire to every world leader with a known street address.

Not that I necessarily went ahead and did all of those things (I was beaten to the punch on one of them at least two goofball science-fiction religions). I'm just saying that not a single one of my sensible friends had been alarmed by my *intent* to carry out these projects.

And that might have been the difference with the Mojave Phone Booth Project. They probably never believed I would follow through on those other projects unless or until I actually did, whereas this time it 'as as clear as desert air that I really did mean to meander into a huge, isolated expanse of desert for the sole purpose of scanning the landscape for a telephone booth.

Of course I can see that their concern made sense, in a general sort of way. Yes, deserts can be dangerous places. And yes, 1997 predated the age of ubiquitous cell phones and wireless Internet connectivity that seeps us in communication with seemingly everyone, everywhere, all the time. 1997 offered barely any methods of summoning help from remote locations. When you traveled into a desert, you got yourself and you got yourself out again, or else someone found your bleached bones later (if those who cared about you

were lucky).

But not even my Ma, who worries about almost everything, worries much about me when I go out on the desert. From childhood on, I've spent huge chunks of time safely wandering the Sonoran Desert. Desert kids back then would strap on a canteen and a pistol, hop on a bicycle, and spend all day out there. Even as an adult, many years' worth of my desert travels took place before cell phones made it possible raise help in case of trouble.

My sensible friends, aware of my desert background, never said boo about any of that. For some reason, though, the idea of a desert phone booth search was where they drew the line. For them, "this *phone booth bussines*" somehow represented some kind of sanity Rubicon, a boundary dividing harmless eccentricity from full-blown psychological disorder.

I'm pretty sure I'm not insane. I could hear how the idea must have sounded to them. I just didn't know how to get them to hear how it sounded to *me*.

Anyone who knows much about people knows that people who tend to lay hold of odd ideas tend also not to be overly deterred by discouraging words. The oddness - and the beauty - of the idea of a telephone booth in the middle of the desert stuck me with such power that, once introduced into my mind, it all but forced me to doubt that it could be only an idea. I suppose one could almost say that I needed it to be real. There was therefore no chance that I was not going to surrender to the urge to cross two deserts to find out for sure - which is why I say, in an entirely non-evangelical way, that I was *led*.

Maybe what concerned my sensible friends even more than the desert component of my project was its DIY component. People can become downright unsettled when they notice others making choices concerning things about which they hadn't ever realized there were choices available. Maybe it's easy to get so comfortable with popular, prefabricated madnesses as to become frightened, or threatened, or just plain annoyed, by a madness of someone's own invention. *Who told you to think up your own madness and to follow it out to its end?*

It was this desert madness I had simultaneously invented and contracted only three months before, rather than dreams of riches or religion, that propelled the Professor and me alongside that line of telephone poles on an old mining road in the Mojave. In Aristotelian terms, that could be said to have been our trip's *final cause* or goal. It could be understood also as the quest's *formal cause* - that is, the idea by which we were propelled.

More concretely, we were propelled by what Aristotle would have called our trip's *efficient cause*: a shiny, new, rental van we had no business driving off of paved roads (nor any legal right, according to the rental contract I was breaking with each additional mile of dirt and sand). Aristotle had no idea

how much more efficient a cause this rented van was than the significantly less efficient cause that ordinarily served as my daily transportation, or tried to: namely, the decrepit 1962 Chevy Biscayne covered in old Herb Alpert record covers I mentioned earlier. Luckily for us, my newly fledged madness had not rendered me foolish enough to try journeying into such dangerous and foreboding terrain in that antiquated bucket of rust.

In a subsequent chapter you will discover that it took only two more months for me to be rendered more than foolish enough to do exactly that. As of August 27, 1997, however, my foolishness extended only far enough to violate car rental agreements and good sense by driving the rented van over washboard roads miles from any asphalt, ever deeper into the Mojave Desert until we noticed the hell out of that line of barely noticeable telephone poles because we were on Boothfari! *Boothafarians*, some annoying person could have called us that day, and of course I did. Led into the tail end of a Mojave Desert summer, we were racing sundown to reach a remote desert phone booth before darkness could obscure it from us as effectively as its remoteness had up until now obscured it from the world at large. We had driven hundreds of miles that day through saguaro-strewn basin-and-range territory, across creosote scrublands, and finally onto Cima Dome and into the world's largest stand of Joshua Trees. We'd gotten lost, found, and lost again, but I was finally confident that we were on the right track (as arc probably most cocksure ne'er-do-wells right before they end up dying of exposure in some wilderness). If I wasn't entirely nuts, each of those telephone poles was a signpost leading us a hundred feet farther from pavement (and food and water and insurance coverage and high-percentage survival conditions) and a hundred feet closer to a telephone booth distinguished from all other telephone booths by one thing and one thing only (or if you sell real estate, three things): *loation*.

As we made our way along that pole line, I knew that to most people the location of this as-yet· conjectural phone booth was absurdly and pointlessly remote and that any effort to discover its exact location was therefore also absurd and pointless. I fully embraced every little bit of that absurdity and pointlessness. I kind of had to, given that I had subtitled the Mojave Phone Booth Project "A Pointless Exercise in Telephony." I had no reason to expect our trip would ever be of interest to anyone but ourselves, maybe a handful of like-minded friends and acquaintances, and the comparatively few but highly cultured and erudite readers of my website, DeuceOfClubs.com.

Little did I know that we were inaugurating almost three years' worth of absurdity, pointlessness, and fun shared by people around the globe. Soon, people other than my friends and I would begin calling the Booth. Shortly after that, others would begin traveling out to visit the Booth, to the point where it sometimes gave me kind of a weird, *What-have-I-done?* foreboding. At such times I had to remind myself that it's not often one has the chance to do something that people from all over the world will even hear about, let

alone join in on.

And boy, did they. The Booth seemed to make people nostalgic for a telecommunications landscape that hadn't even all the way disappeared yet. After my first couple of visits, each passing month increased the likelihood of someone being at the Booth to answer its non-stop ringing. Lives were altered in strange and unpredictable ways. One woman was so inspired by her visit to the Mojave Phone Booth that she sold her New York City apartment and moved into an old miner's shack in a ghost town in the high desert of New Mexico, where she lives to this day. People crossed oceans to visit the Booth, coaxing their rented cars along that narrow, unmarked strip of dirt in the desert misleadingly labeled a "road" on the few maps that bothered to document its existence at all, just to answer the ringing of a payphone whose bell area residents told me they had never heard ring before the Booth became famous.

Thankfully, the locals quickly came to enjoy the Booth's new notoriety. They'd answer the ringing phone whenever they passed, basking in the Booth's reflected celebrity as they spoke with people of different lands and languages in a worldwide yet paradoxically localized Heisenbergian-McLuhanesque celebration of obscurity.

The Mojave Phone Booth became one of the first viral phenomena in Internet history. It was a meme before that term, originated in the 1970s by Richard Dawkins, came into widespread use on the Internet. Indeed, this book can be read as a document of what it feels like to experience a meme from the inside. Stories and photographs documenting the bullet-pocked Booth spread over the world via the Internet, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, gobbling up countless eyeball-hours. Happily, a great many of those hours were "company time" that would otherwise have been squandered on mostly meaningless tasks of paid employment. That alone would have made the Mojave Phone Booth Project worthwhile to me, but so much more came of it than I could have imagined.

Apart from its thousands of media appearances, the Booth inspired websites, stories, songs, films (both documentaries and an independent feature film), parodies (including David Letterman's "Open Mic in the Mojave Desert"), even a public an installation on a bridge in Paris by French artist Sophie Calle in partnership with renowned architect Frank Gehry. The Booth continues to be mentioned in a wide range of articles and books, from abstruse academic studies (with titles such as *Geographies of Media and Communication*) to a novel written by, or ghost written for, a popular and popularly reviled political pundit.

The most important things the Mojave Phone Booth inspired, and continues to inspire, are DIY projects and adventures, which not incidentally is also my hope for this book.

In short, innocent fun and good times were enjoyed by all until this newly beloved telephonic anomaly of unexpectedly wide appeal ended up the way

harmless fun so often does these days in this, our fair land of freedom: namely, with a Public Servant citing The Public Good as an excuse to deprive the Public of yet another Good. The Mojave Phone Booth's final claim to fame was as the first and maybe only Internet meme ever to be targeted for destruction by the United States Government. For reasons about which I will almost certainly speculate in a later chapter, a career peny bureaucrat made it her mission to strong-arm the phone company into ripping out and hauling away the Mojave Phone Booth to an undisclosed site for safekeeping. *Safekeeping* you will no doubt recognize as governmental jargon indicating *utter destruction*, as in the Vietnam-era saying, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it." In the case of the Mojave Phone Booth, that meant reduction to its constituent parts by way of getting crushed and chopped and probably dropped to the bottom of a mine shaft or something, with shadowy government agents dispatched to verify its destruction with celebratory winks, handshakes, and cackling. (You '11 find later that I'm exaggerating only slightly, according to eyewitness information.)

Yet not even the Booth's untimely and unnecessary death could put an end to its ability to keep throwing happy jolts in my direction. It was a measure of the success of the Mojave Phone Booth Project that in 2007 - a full decade after I first set the project in motion and seven years after the poor Booth's demise - I could be lying in bed late at night reading a book of conversations with the late novelist J. G. Ballard and run across the following passage:

> I don't have a PC acrually, but my girlfriend is a keen PC user [...] And some of these sites she's dug up contain accidental poetry that is quite moving. I remember when she first got a PC about six or seven years ago, there were these telephone booths in the Mojave deser" sites. I can't remember the theory of it, but there was some strangely poetic business about this telephone booth which was sill functioning. I can't remember what the exact point of it was, but it became a kind of talismanic object.1

And I thought: *Wow*.

The book you're reading is a book about a telephone booth but in a wider sense it's a book about DIY, about concocting personal adventures, and about making new and improbable connections among strangers. Such was the connective reach of the Mojave Phone Booth Project that an author whose work I had admired for decades had become aware of *my* work and in some way seemed even to admire it.

Of course I'm not making any claims as to the relative merits of my oddball - but don't forget also "strangely poetic" - work and J. G. Ballard's but I will say this: the thought of a cherished author musing over "what the exact point" of one's goofy little project might have been is something that'll just about knock a person flat who's already lying in bed. Such an occurrence feels like a sort of cosmic wink, such as life will shoot a person once in a while

who's lucky or maybe doing at least some small thing right.

Of course, when I first began dialing the phone number, I could not have had the slimmest notion I'd ever be traveling under a darkening sky toward an isolated desert telephone booth whose existence I couldn't entirely accept until I saw and touched it. In the beginning, there was only an idea represented by a sequence of digits, and one person focused like a beam upon that idea.

From the night I first heard of the Booth to the day I heard that a bureaucrat of the United States Government had under false pretenses schemed to tear out and destroy it, just short of three years passed.

But *what* years.

So what gave rise to this new desert madness and the cascade of consequences that flowed from it? How did a constellation of DIY realms - garage rock, zines, art cars, and the Internet - combine to propel an isolated telephone booth to worldwide fame?

Well, as with many of life's extraordinary and oddly interesting occurrences, my adventures with the Mojave Phone Booth began entirely by accident. And, as with some probably not insignificant percentage of entirely accidental adventures, mine began with Girl Trouble.

NOTES

1 J. G. Ballard: Conversations (RE/Search Publications)

GIRL TROUBLE

I went from Phoenix, Arizona / All the way to Tacoma

-Some 1970s butt-rock band

[*Vice versa*]

-Girl Trouble (*attr.*)

I wish I could say that my adventures with the Mojave Phone Booth originated in some romantically cruddy and cramped DIY garage rock dive bar. But this book is supposed to be non-fiction, so I guess I have to admit that my Booth adventures began instead in a bombastic horror show of a nightclub with the ludicrously glitzy (and plagiarized) name The Electric Ballroom, whose decor suggested a ski lodge as conceived in a hot tub in 1973 by someone binging on cocaine and episodes of *Love, American Style*.

On May 26, 1997 I stepped onto the Electric Ballroom's expansive dance floor to wait among the bare handful of people who had turned up to see Tacoma, "Washington's best-loved export, with the possible exception of Almond Roca.

Girl Trouble (band motto: "Eluding Fame Since 1984") are lo-fi royalty, pioneer revivers of the gloriously rough elegance of 1960s garage rock. One former Girl Trouble go-go dancer, alt-country and indie rock icon Neko Case, has described them as "Tacoma's greatest band of all time" who "were never afraid to make fun of themselves and everyone was welcome. They were like a gang you could join without having to shiv somebody."

Girl Trouble embrace and embody the 1960s DIY garage rock attitude that says you don't need polish or gloss or "production value" (and certainly not

Auto Tune) but only desire, will, and maybe a few trace elements of ability to get you started. From that, all else follows, which means that almost anything can follow (as you'll soon see). This attitude has inspired generations of garage rockers, punks, and self publishers. Girl Trouble's DIY ways have directly inspired DIY in others. It was Girl Trouble's drummer who inspired Neko to take up drumsticks and start making her own music. "I learned so much from them," she has said, "and I can say for certain that Bon van Wheelie is the reason I wanted to play drums."

Most importantly for our purposes, it was also Girl Trouble who provided, albeit unknowingly, the flip (as Pascal said of Voltaire's creator-deity) that set into motion the Mojave Phone Booth Project, although not by means of their music. As Ms. Case notes, in addition to their music, Girl Trouble also produced "a cool magazine called *Wig Out!*"

After the Mojave Phone Booth Project got going, many reporters just assumed it was an offspring of the Internet. While it's true that the Booth's appeal moved beyond my small circle of friends and deviants by means of the Internet, the fame of the Phone Booth had its origins in a pre-Internet medium. It was in fact precisely the son of goof-assed adventure to have sprung from the spectacularly fertile DIY lab environment known as *zine culture*. Zines - homemade magazines - were ground zero of an explosion of do-it-yourselfism in the 1980s and beyond. Zines expanded the exercise of freedom of the press, a freedom up until then enjoyed mostly by wealthy people or corporations. With the cheap availability of photocopies, lo-fi publishing became available to individuals, especially those who wanted to publish subject matter that established publishers wouldn't have recognized as worth printing. In 1982, zinc editor Candi Strecker coined a term I love, SAP: Self-Amusing Personality. Where there is an SAP, there will be DIY, and where there is DIY, you'll find one or more SAPs. Self-amusement and do-it-yourself adventure are what the book you're reading is all about and why the Mojave Phone Booth phenomenon began with people who made music or an or zines themselves, out of the mainstream, and formed far-flung communities connected by a son of slow-motion Internet that consisted of the network of postal services worldwide.

With the popularization of the Internet, most people in our rime have become used to something that was once uncommon but was common in the zinc world, namely, having friends one has never met n person. One of my favorite friends of this type was Bon von Wheelie, Girl Trouble's drummer and the editor, publisher, and distributor of Girl Trouble's DIY house organ *Wig Out!*, which featured articles by a number of different writers, most or all of whom existed only on paper because they were in reality Bon obtained issues of *Wig Out!* by sending her issues of my photocopied magazine of

itinerant adventure and expectancy violation, which consisted of photos of, and commentary purportedly by, my twelve-inch-tall statue of the composer Richard Wagner.

That I would ever meet Bon in person seemed unlikely. I haven't been to Tacoma since I was a kid visiting relatives there, and although I'm sure Tacoma garage bands party like rock stars, probably few of them get to tour like James Brown. Nevertheless, in May, 1997, three months before my trek into the Mojave Desert with Professor Cardyhouse, some generous law of the universe saw to it that not only would Girl Trouble finally going to play in Arizona, but they were booked at the Electric Ballroom, which was only three blocks from my house.

The show's headliners were Satan's Pilgrims, a blistering surf band that would on any other night have been a better than average reason for me to venture out and appear in public for a change. Add Girl Trouble and I don't care if you've got two strikes and an ankle monitor, that's a must-see.

Sad to say, very few people in the Phoenix metro area shared that view. Not supporting the great Girl Trouble when they finally visit your city ought to violate the moral code of any right-thinking civilization and yet the cavernous Electric Ballroom seemed even more cavernous that night because it was almost empty.

Even so, on that fine May evening, against the grain of the Ballroom's would-be glitz, surf and garage rock would boldly go. If my expectations were met, Girl Trouble would put on the kind of show where the focus would be on fun and energy, and any bum notes would go unnoticed by most of the onlookers and possibly at least half of the musicians. When I tell you that the show exceeded expectations, I think I speak not only for myself but for the couple dozen other attendees.

I couldn't have known that finally seeing Girl Trouble in person - though a huge blast - would not end up being the night's most memorable feature. Instead, our trajectories had somehow been arranged such that I would be perfectly placed 10 receive a homemade magazine that would powerfully alter my life, the lives of many others around the globe, and the life of a phone booth hundreds of miles away.

After Girl Trouble left the stage, I skipped out on what I'm sure was a blazing Satan's Pilgrims set that I would not otherwise have been willing to miss. I instead went around back of the club to finally meet Girl Trouble in person and see whether I could cajole them into posing for a photo with Wagner and also see if Bon had any issues of *Wig Out!*, though that seemed unlikely. A few years had passed since I'd seen any copies. 1 didn't know whether Bon was even still putting them out and if she were, I didn't know whether she'd be carrying any copies on tour. If so, it seemed doubtful she'd have any left by the time Girl Trouble's U-Haul rolled all the way into the Sonoran Desert. On top of that, I wasn't going to be able to trade her a new Wagner zine for one. Several years earlier, I had abandoned copy shops and

post office boxes and moved Wagner and Deuce of Clubs from the world of zines onto the World Wide Web.

Having been out of touch with Bon since I'd gone over to the Internet, I didn't know that, shockingly enough, even Girl Trouble had washed up onto the sunny shores of the pixel-based world, though not without a fight. Bon was handling Girl Trouble's new website and still publishing *Wig Out!* Naturally, Bon went digital in as lo-fi a way as possible. Here's her Luddite home page message:

> Greetings Earthlings and welcome to our new high tech world of the future. We arc the low-tech rock and roll band Girl Trouble. Our idea of an adventure in modern technology is to turn on the TV and change the channel to *Streets of San Francisco* re-runs using a remote control. So why would dorks like us be having one of these web/home page deals? Because somebody cold us it was a good idea and we pretty much do anything what somebody tells us.

Clearly, the Internet had not spoiled Girl Trouble. (Things have not changed in this regard - in a 2014 Facebook comment, Bon wrote: "KP and Kahuna are not on Facebook. KP says he never will be and Kahuna calls computers 'argument machines.' So right now it's up to me and Dale to keep GT on the world wide web.")

When Bon returned to Tacoma after the tour, she wrote on the Girl Trouble website about the band's visit to The Electric Ballroom:

> In Tempe we got an air conditioned motel and lazed around. We weren't prepared for what awaited us at this gig .... The club was absolutely gigantic. It was exactly what I would have described as the typical ROCK dub, a club we have no business in, for any reason... You just wanted to tap them on the shoulder and ell them they could relax for the night, it's only Girl Trouble, but you didn't want co disappoint them. ... We played to about 25 people (five of them looked enthused). There were more staff at the club than paying customers. But that didn't stop them from using the full throttle light show on us. I've never had so many lights flash on me as I reigned supreme on my gigantic drum riser.

I'm not sure whether Wagner figured into Bon's head count, but I hope she knew that I, at least, was one of the "five enthused." Bon continues:

> We did get to meet an old friend who I used co write to. It's Godfrey and he made a magazine called Wagner's World. Wagner is the plaster bust that's been everywhere, seen everything and met lots of major stars. Well, Kurt unfortunately high tailed it back to the motel but Dale, Kahuna and I got the chance co actually hold Wagner and get our photo taken.

Now comes the part of Bon's account with the fateful flick that set in motion an avalanche of fun and foolishness:

> We also gave Godfrey the latest *Wig Out!*

People these days seem unable to resist repeating the cliched phrase "fast forward to." Let's instead press an imaginary Pause button. Now zoom in on Bon's hand placing that issue of *Wig Out!*in my hand. I know that any connection can seem, or be made to seem, tenuous in retrospect and of course any chain of connections can be *What if?*-ed at any point. But consider some

ways that events could have gone differently. Bon could have forgotten to bring copies of *Wig Out!* to give away free to random dorks like me. Bon could have run out of copies of Wig Out! earlier in the tour. I could have left the show without meeting Girl Trouble. I could have lost that copy of *Wig Out!* while walking home. Or I could have just never gotten around to reading it.

Realistically, none of the last three things could ever have happened. I tend to be fanatical in some of my ways. But you get what I'm saying. Things could have gone a different way. A broken link at any point in that night's chain and a number of subsequent events would have been 100% less subsequent You would not be reading this book, for one thing. And I would have far fewer friends than I have today. The Mojave Desert might still have a far-flung telephone booth. Many, many consequences - most for good, a few for ill - can be traced back to that moment when Bon von Wheelie put that issue of *Wig Out!* into my hand. But as my friend poetdog once wrote, "the kneebone's connected to the legbone, and even the ulna has heard about it." Which is to say, that issue of *Wig Out!* did manage to stay in my hand, and I was pausing to read it by the light of streetlamps cven as I was walking back to my house.

> There is a milestone in everyone's life. Sometimes it's just the turning of a page.
> - Mary Lou Gulley, *My Mystery Castle*

Among the first pages of Girl Trouble's zine, my cyes fell on a paragraph that instantly grabbed my attention. It was a letter to editor Bon von Wheelie from another von, Nick von Robison, describing another DIY project. Robison, I would later learn, was a DIY guy from way back, having played guitar in The Hatfields, a 1960s garage rock band you might remember from the *Back From the Grave* compilation albums. Nick unknowingly set in motion a worldwide round robin of DIY fun by writing as follows:

Dear Wig Out!

We've let things slide a little since the last issue. The HQ is in shambles, beer bottles and empty Dorito bags are stacked to the ceiling, the dust is an inch thick, the mail is piled everywhere. Should we take care of business or go to the Demolition Derby at the Spanaway Speedway? Below are two old letters we found in the rubble on our way out the door.

ific Northwest
ty is just too
gazillion
as in Pullman
e river or in
en Bellingham.
s on a decent
which is why I
ery when the
they start
smooth sugary
nd the crappy
h! Remember
he NY
orn when
Box to come
this
derful I think
agical word if
ver tire of
ed by the
associations

Dear Wig Out,
Recently, I spotted a small dot with the word "telephone" beside it on a map of the Mojave desert, 15 miles from the main interstate in the middle of nowhere. Intrigued, I donned a cheap, brown serape and a pair of wing-tips and headed out to find it in my old jeep. After many hours I do find it (the glass is shot out and the phone book is missing) but it works! Apparently, this booth was put in after WWII for the use of a nearby mine which ceased operations in the 60s; why the local phone company keeps it operational is anybody's guess. A nearby rancher told me that in the 70s they replaced the old rotary style phone with push buttons because the sheep were having trouble dialing. Oh, if you're interested, the number is (619) 733-9969. Let it ring a long time if you want a response.

Nicholas Von Hobision
Huntington Beach, CA

I read that and had three thoughts in quick succession:

1. *Ho-*
2. *-ly*

and

3. SMOKES!

There is not the slightest chance I could ever hear about a telephone booth in the middle of a desert and not dial its number ASAP. In the pre-cell phone age, though, ASAP didn't include the option of dialing the number as I walked home. In those days, *telephone* still mostly meant land line. Accordingly, mere seconds after unlocking my front door I took the shortest and straightest possible route through my living room clutter to my telephone and excitedly jabbed in the number printed in the *Wig Out!* letter. Of course, I had no reason other than the word of some stranger in a zine to believe that either the phone number or the phone booth it represented were genuine. Then again, I had no reason not to believe it.

Brrrrrrt Brrrrrrt

I'm sure it must have sounded the same as any other ringing line ever did.

Brrrrrrt Brrrrrrt

To me, though, it sounded different, somehow.

Brrrrrrt Brrrrrrt

I let it ring quite a while before I hung up.

What instantly struck me was the simultaneous triviality and immensity of what I had just done. I had merely tapped a sequence of numbers on a telephone keypad. At the same time, by doing that from my home in the Sonoran Desert, I had caused something to occur, physically, hundreds of miles away in a phone booth sitting all alone somewhere in the next desert over, the Mojave. I had made a telephone bell ring.

I liked the thought of that. I liked it *a lot*.

Of course, that was assuming that this alleged phone booth was real. Without hesitation, without even realizing I had made the assumption, I already had.

Merely contemplating the possibility that I was causing a phone to ring out in the night in a phone booth in the middle of the Mojave Desert somewhere strongly took root in my mind I could already tell that something interesting was happening to me. And I knew I'd be dialing that number again.

Wall, I've seen things and I've herrd things, some of them ornery, and some you'd love to believe, they was that gorgeous and improbable.
- Stewart Edward White, *Arizona Nights* (1907)

Before going to bed about an hour after midnight, I found myself redialing the phone number printed in *Wig Out!* several more times, just to hear a little more of the ringing. After I went to bed, I couldn't stop thinking about that phone booth and its representation of the tension between solitude and communication, a tension I experience myself, daily. I tend to think of myself as more or less a hermit although some of my friends dispute my claim. Even Professor Cardyhouse has been quoted in print as saying, He calls himself a hermit. But he's the most social hermit I've ever met in my life."

I don't know how many hermits the Professor has met but I say considering myself a hermit doesn't mean I can't mix with people and have fun. What I mean by *hermit* is that, left to my own devices, I'm always fine with spending time alone. Like me, then, an isolated desert phone booth would be compelled to be a comparatively sociable hermit: willing to communicate, but on its own terms.

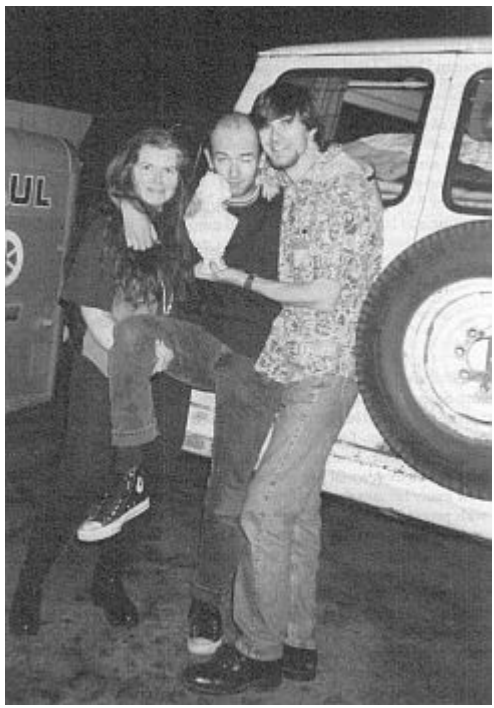
As I waited to fall asleep, I imagined what the scene out there might look like, a lone telephone booth in the Mojave Desert, hundreds of miles from me, standing out from a landscape dotted with junipers or maybe even Joshua trees, depending upon where in the Mojave it was. I hoped it was Joshua trees.

In retrospect, it seems odd that it had never occurred to me to imagine a phone booth plopped onto a desert. Any estimate I tried to make of the number of hours I've spent shambling around the desert by myself would

probably lowball the real number. I've seen plenty of utility poles where it seemed to me they didn't belong, but not even one time during any of my desert wanderings had I ever come across a phone booth.

The scene in my head raised so many questions. Who went to the trouble of running a line of telephone poles into the desert to accommodate a phone booth? When would they have done it? Who, if anyone, still used its phone? From how far away was the booth phone's ringing audible?Did anyone live near enough to hear it? Did anyone ever stop or camp or just wander by and hear the phone's bell, assuming it happened to ring at just the right moment? Would a desert wanderer make the effort to walk over to the booth and answer the phone before it stopped ringing, just to see who in the world might be calling such a place? And who might that person be?

At the evening's outset I had expected I'd be going to bed that night with my ears ringing because of Girl Trouble's decibels. Instead, I went to bed with my ears ringing with the sound of an imagined telephone bell. I was still thinking phone booth thoughts as I finally fell asleep. Clearly, this phone booth wasn't going to leave me alone. I had the definite sensation that an idea for a new project had not only been conceived but might already be crowning.



THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH PROJECT

It is recognized that you have a funny sense of film
-Lord Dryden, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

Once a notion begins to take hold in my head, there's not much I can do about it even if I wanted to. Usually it means there's some embryonic project lolling around up there, slouching towards consciousness to be born. I awakened the next morning to the birth of a project involving this possibly entirely hypothetical desert telephone booth. The project was as follows: I resolved that from that day forward, at least once each day, weekends included, I would dial this number supposedly belonging to a telephone booth in the desert. I would let each call ring no fewer than twenty rimes. And I would record each of those calls.

Sometime during the night some nameless muse had inspired me to give this phone booth in the Mojave the wildly inventive name The Mojave Phone Booth. It must be the same muse who then inspired me to give my Mojave Phone Booth project the equally inventive name The Mojave Phone Booth Project.

Having taken part in many hoaxes, I was all too aware that Nick's Booth tale could be a hoax. For all I knew, the number could be ringing a phone somewhere that for whatever reason never got answered, and Nick or someone else had decided to spread the story that it rang some isolated desert phone. Or it could be a number that once belonged to some long-disconnected phone that somehow never got tagged with one of those "this phone is no

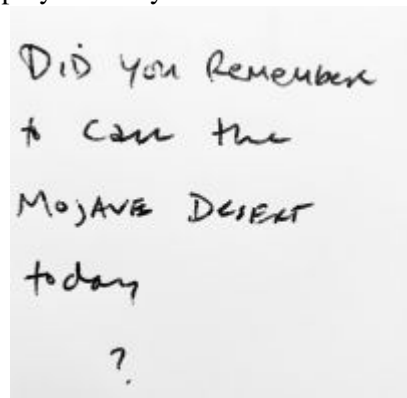
longer in service" messages. Or it could just be one of those test numbers phone company technicians use.

I refused to seriously entertain any of those possibilities. Among the *dijecta membra* of an involuntary religious childhood is an occasional but persistent tendency toward groundless belief. Consequently, I accepted as true the claims of *Wig Out!* letter writer Nick von Robison for no reason other than that I wanted them to be true.

But if Nick really was telling the truth and the Booth was real, and operational, and as isolated as he described, I understood that it might take years of daily calling before anyone ever happened along to answer the phone, if anyone ever did. To me, that only made the project even more worthwhile. In fact, if no one ever answered, that would also be fine with me.

It wasn't that the project's nominal goal didn't matter to me. I did someday want to cross paths telephonically with a stranger in the Mojave Desert who would happen to be near enough to the phone when I called and willing to pick up a ringing telephone in an isolated desert spot. But there was a deeper element to it.

For me it was more than enough to listen to the ringing and know that from anywhere I could get a dial tone I could cause something to happen out in a desert. Even when marooned in a city, I now had a ritual that could transport my imagination out to a remote desert whenever I wanted, from wherever I happened to be. The old Jim Stafford song about "The Wildwood Weed" spoke of how it enabled one to "take a trip and never leave the far. " The Mojave Phone Booth enabled me to take a trip and never leave the phone. Plus, as long as no one picked up the receiver, the only cost would be my time. The thought of anyone actually answering seemed to me such a remote possibility that I never once gave any thought as to how I'd explain to an employer the mysterious unauthorized charge on the company phone bill.



Dialing the Booth's number instantly became integrated into my daily routine. Instead of person to-person calls, I was placing desert-to-desert calls, from the Sonoran to the Mojave. On the tape, at the beginning of each call, I'd record the Booth number's robotic touch-tone beeps, the last four of which, 9969, sounded like the old Ajax detergent commercial jingle "Stronger Than Dirt" (that also appears at the end

of "Touch Me," the song by The Doors). As the phone at the other end rang and the tape rolled, I would state the date and time of the call and anything else it occurred to me to say. After no fewer than twenty rings, according to my project's guidelines, I would hang up. In case I might forget to call, I affixed a sticky note to my bathroom mirror to remind me to contact the desert daily.

Although I left it stuck to the mirror for years, I never needed any reminding. I always called multiple times every day. The only calls I could record with my microphone and recorder were from my home, but I would also call from work, from friends' homes, from public payphones - basically, anytime I had a free moment and access to a telephone.

My friend Diane noted how weird it was that I, of all people, would initiate a phone-related project that didn't involve prank calls because aside from prank calls I always avoided talking on the phone. I still do. I currently have 1,500 monthly cellular minutes and if I use even a tenth of them, it's only because of occasional long, late-night conversations with my good pal Ms. Butters back East. In the era of mechanical answering machines, however, I always used to screen my calls. Consequently, most of my incoming phone messages began with the caller's voice saying things along the lines of, "I *know* you're standing there listening to me right now. PICK UP THE PHONE!

In spite of my anti-phone history, visitors to my house found themselves encouraged, if not strong armed, to take part in my new project. Within a few days of inaugurating the project, I already had half an hour's worth of tape of a ringing line mixed with scattered comments by me and my visitors, some of the latter consisting of evocations of the desert ("I's May the 31st in the middle of nowhere. This is Coppé ringing! So you better pick it up! Water ... waaaaater..... ") or conjectures by my more sensible friends regarding my state of mind ("Is this *really* what you want me to do?").

During free moments, dialing the Mojave Phone Booth became as automatic to me as tapping a pencil on a desk. In *The Matrix* a ringing phone was the means of escape from an artificial, soul-destroying world. When I dialed the Booth's number from a workplace, the ringing of that phone line performed a similar function for me, and also served as a renewal of purpose, keeping at the front of my mind that the reason I was sweat-stuck to a desk chair in a cubicle in an office in a building in a complex in an industrial area in some large hive called a "city" was to make money not only just to survive but to finance my various projects, no matter how pointless they might seem to others or might in fact be. Pushing ten buttons created an imaginary pipeline to an open horizon and saved me from sinking into the dullness of comfort.

The wild goose knows that when a man is faced
with nothing but comfort, it is only a matter of

> time before that man goes berserk. The wild goose wasn't an evil spirit at all! The wild goose was my friend! The wild goose was forcing me to go to Timbuktu so that I could terrorize myself back to sanity! The trip was on.
>
> - Trent Harris, *The Wild Goose Chronicles*

> My father thought this place was too dangerous for a young lady. He didn't want me to go, and stressed this point often. "Daughter, I think you're going on a wild goose chase," he said. I finally replied somewhat flippantly, "Then I'II gather my geese."
>
> - Hallie Crawford Sillwell, *I'll Gather My Geese*

Given that I had envisioned the Mojave Phone Booth Project as a lifelong undertaking, I was happy to find that after a few weeks of calling the Booth multiple times a day, I was enjoying it just as much, even more than I had expected I would. I began to think that someday on my deathbed, if I got to have a deathbed, I would turn my head to gaze with satisfaction upon bookcases filled with cassette tapes of my own voice stating the date, time, and whatever else happened to be on my mind at the moment, all to the accompaniment of the ring of a distant desert telephone of whose actual existence I had no proof. As hard as it apparently was for some of my friends to understand, I was committed to my Mojave Phone Booth Project. I was in it for life.

But life can have a funny sense of humor sometimes. Less than a month after I had begun my project, it suddenly became easier to understand for nearly all of my friends. At about ten in the morning on June 200, 1997, I dialed the number as usual. I was at home with the tape recorder running. But this time, something was different. I didn't hear the familiar ringing of the line. Instead I heard:

ONK ONK ONK ONK

The honking of a wild goose, maybe?

Nope.

It was possibly the first ever happily welcomed *busy signal*.

My first thought - as Leonard Nimoy used to say about a dozen times per episode of *In Search of* ... was - "Could it be?" Could someone at that moment really be talking on the phone inside the Mojave Phone Booth? I could barely entertain the possibility. If the Mojave Phone Booth was anywhere near as remote as Nick's description made it sound, random contact after less than a month of calling seemed, as Nimoy's character Spock might say, highly improbable. It'd be like some bizarre self-help book: *Thirty Days to a Less Isolated Phone Booth*.

Even in my agitated state it occurred to me that although I had already by then become practiced at punching in the Booth's digits, it was still possible

that I had misdialed. I put the phone receiver back on its cradle, picked it up again, listened for a dial tone, and then carefully pressed the well-memorized sequence of digits again. And again I heard:

ONK ONK ONK ONK

Yep. I had the right number, all right.

If this phone booth was real and was really in the middle of the Mojave Desert, there seemed to me to be three possibilities. Either something was wrong with the line, or someone in another place was also repeatedly re-dialing the Booth's number (and it seemed unlikely that there would be two Mojave Phone Booth Projects), or else someone was at that very moment talking on the phone in a phone booth in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

It was probably good that I was alone because I was laughing and saying out loud, *No WAY!* as I kept pushing the phone's Redial button.

ONK ONK ONK ONK

(Redial)

ONK ONK ONK ONK

(Redial)

ONK ONK ONK ONK

I kept doing that until after about three minutes I heard the sound that up until that day I had always heard after dialing the Booth's number.

Brrrrrrt

If someone really had been using the Booth's phone just then, I hoped they hadn't left quickly. In my experience, though, people out in the desert weren't usually in much of a hurry.

Brrrrrrt

I hoped it wasn't someone - say, a passing desert motorcyclist - who might be inclined to peel out instantly after hanging up, or might not be able to hear the ring through the helmet or over the noise of a revving engine.

Brrrrrt

Then I heard a slight clicking noise. Then: silence. But the silence had that distinctive quality of silence you hear when someone picks up a phone receiver but doesn't say anything.

After a pause that tightened the spring on a month's worth of stored-up anticipation, a female voice said, tentatively:

Hello?

"*Nobody* calls out here!"

I was nonplussed. It wasn't that I'd have expected anyone answering a phone in this, or any other part of the English-speaking world, to say anything other than "Hello." What had me tongue-tied was that after thirty days of dialing the number hundreds of times, nothing came to my mind to say back. As stupid as it sounds, at no time during my weeks of calling the Mojave Phone Booth many times per day had I ever given the slightest thought as to what I might say if anyone ever answered. Maybe that means I never really believed anyone ever would.

It's a good thing I'm not a scientist working with the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. I know I would mishandle first contact with intelligent alien life because my response to contact with intelligent desert life was, in my excitement, to accidentally jerk the microphone jack right out of the tape recorder.

The suction cup microphone I used recorded both sides of phone conversations, but when I yanked out the cord, it activated the tape machine's built-in microphone, which was able to record only my side of the exchange at first. That's why the first part of the following transcript presents only my disjointed babbling and not the answers of the somewhat puzzled-sounding voice on the other end of the line.

Hello?/? Uh ... are you in the Mojave Desert? You are? I'm sorry? [I couldn't hear well at first] ... *you are in the Mojave Desert, right? Okay, this is going to sound like a strange question. I've been calling this number every day for a while, just to see if anybody would ever answer it, and so I have to ask you: Why are you in the middle of the Mojave Desert? Oh! You live out there, and you don't have a phone. Oh, 'cause this is about, what - fifteen miles off the Interstate? Wow! So you live out there. How do you like living out there?* [She says she loves it.] *I've always wanted to live in the middle of the* - [She asks where I live.] *Well, I lve in Arizona. I'm calling from Phoenix. But I used to live out in the middle of the desert.* [Here she said something about almost not answering the phone.] *Well, I'm glad you did, because, seriously, I've been calling this number every day for about a month. Somebody gave me this number in the middle of nowhere, so I've been - there's a what?* [At this point I finally managed to plug the microphone back into the tape recorder.]

There's a cattle guard.
How long have you lived in the Mojave Desert?
Well - on and off - all my life.

Really.
Uh-huh.
So what do you do out there?
Mine.
What kind of mining?
Cinders. Volcanic cinders.
What do you do with volcanic cinders?
They make cinder block with 'em.
Oh.
And they use 'em for landscaping, or road control, [inaudible] control.
I didn't realize they used real cinder for cinder block. I thought they just made it out of cement.
No. It's real cinders. It's a lightweight aggregate.
Wow. And you've lived out there all your life.
No. I've lived in the city, too, but I've lived out here on and off all my life.
You like it better out there, huh?
You bet.
Wow. That's just so cool that somebody finally answered! I think that's so cool! Seriously, I'm going to come visit that phone booth someday.
Yeah, you ought to!
Yeah, I'm going to come out there and I'm going to write on the phone both. I'm gonna say -
It's right in the middle of the east Mojave National Preserve.
Now, what would be the nearest town?
The nearest town of any size?
Well, any town that would have a gas station, for example.
At the turn-off. At Cima Road.
Is that off of l-10?
1-15. Yeah, it's on the way to, you know, between Baker and Vegas.
So how often do you come and make phone calls?
Uh ... it depends on ... who I need to call.
I mean, is it once a month, or ... ?
Well, when we're hauling water we stop and make calls so I can get messages.
Wow, you gotta haul water and everything.
Oh, yeah.
So where you live there's just no services.
Right We're twelve-and-a-half miles off the freeway.
Do you use generators for electricity?
Uh-huh.
Really.
Really.

That's so cool!
Yeah, I know.
But it's like a regular house & stuff.
Yeah.
Wow! So you have to be real careful how much electricity you use, how much water you use -
Well ... yeah. Probably more so than most.
Wow. Do you even have neighbors?
We have a couple that live out here and help us with the mine that have, uh, mobile outfits.
You just like being alone.
Yeah!
That's so cool.
[*Garbled*] ... forever, and not see other people or other buildings or other traffic.
Oh, you don't know how appealing that sounds right about now.
And we're about 4500 feet, so it's considerably cooler than Phoenix.
Is that right? What's the temperature right now?
Oh, it's probably in the seventies.
Are you serious?
It's a little breezy, so it's cooler now, but we don't get over a hundred very often. Baker does, but we don't.
It's about a hundred and fve here. Right now! [*This was about ten in the morning.*]
Right, well we're supposed to get to that in Vegas today, but we won't get that hot.
So the nearest big city would be Vegas.
Right, we're about seventy-five miles from there.
Do you go to Vegas much?
More often than I like. I just went yesterday.
Is that where you go when you have to do a lot of shopping?
When we have to get parts, and shopping, and mail We have to go fifty miles to get our mail.
Wow, how often do you do that?
Oh, probably once a week or so.
When you do grocery shopping, do you shop for like a month's worth?
No, 'cos somebody's usually going in at least once a week.
So you go to Vegas to do that.
Uh-huh. Or we have a place over by Ridgecrest. We go over there.
I hope you don't mind my asking all these questions.
Nah, that's okay.
I'm just really fascinated, and when I got the busy signal I went, Wow! Somebody's there! So I just kept hitting Redial, Redial, Redial. Then I got the ring and I went, Yes!

I thought, I gotta answer it, I mean, *nobody* calls out here!
So the phone booth ... is it just sitting by the road?
Uh, yeah, by the dirt road, going over to the other mine.
So there's a dirt road and then there's just a phone booth sitting there.
Right.
Do you know why it's there?
Well ... because it's the only communications we have out here.
Someone said it's been there so long it might have been military.
Nah. It's been shot up, there's no windows left in it. Originally it was quite a ways from here, it was about three dozen miles from here when my father and mother were out here mining the mine.
Wow. Your parents are from there, too.
Well, they've had the mine since 1948. And we had the phone booth down where the road splits off [*unintelligible*]. And my dad had to pay the phone bill on it, and people kept stealing money out of it, so he had to - [*Unintelligible because the strange clicking noise that's been going during the whole all suddenly got louder*].
Are you hearing that weird noise?
Yeah.
Does it always do that?
Yeah, on and off, yeah.
I hope that's not a Geiger counter.
No.
That would be bad.
No, it's just something in this phone line. It's a long, long, long telephone line.
I always figured that if someone ever picked up-I mean, I figured I'd be calling this number for years - and I thought if someone picked up it'd be someone broke down or something.
No, I'm just making my phone calls.
My name's Godfrey, by the way. What's yours?
Mine is Lorene.
Lorene, it's nice to meet you!
You, too.
If the phone's ever ringing again, pick it up. It'll be me.
I'll do that.

After I hung up, I was totally wired. *Contact*! And it went better than I would have predicted because Lorene had been such a good sport about it. I was glad she was a desert rat. I mean, the odds probably favored someone on hand to answer the ringing of an isolated desert phone being a desert rat, but *still*. And she was a miner. How cool was *that*? The closest I'd ever come to

mining was having an uncle who managed to get swindled in a gold mine scam up in Crown King and a cousin who while digging in his own backyard managed on two separate occasions to strike utilities. Given the choice, a desert miner is exactly the sort of person I would have wanted to answer my call. I had waited until the end to ask her name because it's not as if she were some sort of city-dwelling glad-hander. But she had gladly stood in a desert telephone booth and patiently answered the questions of some nutty stranger. Desert rats usually display varying degrees of reticence or wariness. I do it myself and don't fault it in others. But as the psycho guy in the movie *Phone Booth* said, "Isn't it funny? You hear a phone ring and it could be anybody. But a ringing phone has to be answered, doesn't it?"

Just as that day's busy signal was the first I was ever happy to hear, that month's phone bill was the first I was ever excited to receive. The bill told me my seven-minute chat with Lorene had cost me two dollars and three pennies. I think I definitely got the better of the phone company on that deal. (In the mere thirty days in which I'd known about the Booth, its area code had been changed from 619 to 760.)

* Direct Dialed Calls
Domestic Calls

	Date	Time	Place And Number Called	Type	Rate	Min	Amount
1.	JUN 20	10:05A	To BAKER CA 760 733-9969	Dirct	Day	7.0	2.03

A few things occurred to me immediately after the call.

1. It would be a good idea for someone compulsively dialing a telephone number to have something in mind to say on the off chance that someone answers.

2. I'd never considered that whoever I might reach would probably be as surprised as I was.

3. Not until I transcribed our conversation did I realize how goofy I must have sounded to Lorene. For one thing, I didn't know what *cinder blocks* were made of? Good job, Guy Who Has Lived in Various Cinder Block Houses. Moreover, in the course of our brief conversation, I had uttered the word *wow* no fewer than nine times. Another new project suggested itself: maybe try not to say *wow* quite so much?

Then again, *wow* accurately summed up how I felt.

After the Mojave Phone Booth became well known, radio personality Clyde Lewis wrote an article explicitly noting the parallel between the Mojave Phone Booth Project and Project SETI. In 1977, Franklin University professor Jerry Ehman was using the giant "Big Ear" radio telescope at Ohio State University to listen for extraterrestrial transmissions. Going over the telescope's printouts for August 15, Ehman noticed something he had hoped

for but probably never thought he would find: a pattern emerging from the cosmic background noise.

Excitedly, Dr. Ehman circled the transmission on the printout and wrote a single word beside it: "Wow!" The signal never repeated and is now thought to have emanated from a pair of comets, but it is still referred to as "The Wow Signal."

Lewis viewed the Mojave Phone Booth story as "not just a story of an odd obsession. It is the story of human diligence. It is a model that is an object lesson for all of us." The lesson? "If we are persistent like Godfrey," wrote Lewis, "we may find ourselves saying wow!" adding, "Just remember to make sure everything is plugged in." Bon van Wheelie would later comment, "I think that's the fascinating story - just from little increments to *Wow!*"

It's funny to think the whole Booth saga was kicked off by a little dot on a map and someone who went out to see the object represented by the dot. For that, I owed thanks to Girl Trouble, Bon van Wheelie, and mysterious Wig Out! letter writer Nick von Robison. The first lesson of the Mojave Phone Booth seemed to be that if you bring the rough elegance of garage rock to the Sonoran Desert, maybe only a couple dozen people will bother to show up to hear you, but one of them might be a pal of yours who up until now you've never met in person, into whose hand you might press the latest copy of your zine, and it might feature an anecdote about an adventure, which might inspire another adventure that ends up inspiring people around the world. You just never know.

"You should be very proud to think you inspired a castle."
I had never thought of it that way. I *was* an inspiration.
- Mary Lou Gulley, *My Mystery Castle*

I soon discovered that many people assumed that Lorene's answer of my Booth call marked the successful completion of the Mojave Phone Booth Project, and that I would stop dialing the Mojave Phone Booth's number every day.

But I didn't.

Of *course* I didn't.

Instead, I continued my daily ritual of tapping in the phone number and taping my calls. It wasn't only in hopes that Lorene would answer again, even though when I listened to the tape of our conversation I realized I hadn't asked her all the questions I would have if I'd properly prepared myself, chief among

which was *How do I get to the Booth?* But as I say, my compulsion to call had more to do with the desert itself than its inhabitants. Recently, referring to my sticky note reminder, the typesetter of this book (whom you'll meet in the next chapter) accurately observed, "You weren't calling a phone booth - you were calling *the desert*!" Maybe Lorene would answer again sometime. Maybe someone else out there would pick up. If there were other nearby desert residents, maybe I would even enter local lore as That Weird Guy Who Calls The Old Phone Booth For Whatever Odd Reason. But whether anyone ever picked up the ringing phone again, I meant for my Mojave Phone Project to continue for life. Not only that, but during my conversation with Lorene I had even extemporaneously expanded the project. "I'm going to come visit that phone booth someday," I had told her, and I meant it. Not going out there was not even an option. To crown the project, I would inscribe my name inside the Booth alongside a message inspired by what I had said to Lorene:

IF YOU HEAR THIS PHONE RINGING, PICK IT UP: IT'S ME

Fate has its own plans, however. Unbeknownst to me, "IT'S ME" would remain a certainty for only a short time. Within a matter of months, when the phone rang at the Mojave Phone Booth, it was not guaranteed to be me. It might have been - I was still dialing, of course - but it could also have been almost anyone, calling from almost anywhere in the world that offered phone service. That was directly because of the next thing I innocently and maybe also foolishly did.

"Hello? A Pointless Exercise in Telephony"

It is surprising that the very conveniences of civilization can
be made the source of so much vexation and annoyance.
- The Reverend Doctor Morgan Dix,
quoted in *The Redor and the Rogue*

When one has a chance to annoy people, one should do so.
- Oswald Spengler (Ar.)

Minutes after talking with Lorene, I picked up the phone again. I didn't redial the number but I almost did, because I wanted to know exactly where the Booth was. It felt as if it would be embarrassing if she answered again, though. "Oh, uhhh ... hi, again. Remember me? The nutball from a few minutes ago?" Instead I phoned friends to spread the good tidings that one of my calls to the Mojave Phone Booth had been answered. I don't remember how many friends I called, but it was quite a few. I was happy to hear so much laughter and glee and surprised how little I cared that most of it was mine.

The next obvious step for someone afflicted with the documentarian impulse was to chronicle the event. No big thing, just a web page, nothing to write home about (although something eventually to write this big ol'

nonfiction book about). It has occasionally been suggested that I might have done better by say, settling down and having kids or something. Pfft! To me the planet does not appear to be short on the products of human spawning. It did, however, appear to lack a website celebrating a desert phone booth.

To the Mojave Phone Booth website I gave the tile *Hello? - A Pointless Eerie in Telephony*. I wrote some introductory material about the project and how it had come about and included a transcription of conversation with Lorene. Next, without even a trace of the hesitation many would later suggest I ought to have experienced, I uploaded the new Mojave Phone Booth website to the Internet, under the aegis the giant umbrella of tomfoolery that is DeuceOfClubs.com.

Had the Mojave Phone Booth Project taken place a few years before, I would have immediately documented its progress in a zine, and with the exct same lack of deliberation. As the great Grandma Prisbrey, who built Bottle Village, said of her creation, "Oh, I just took a notion." Grandma Prisbrey no idea how widely known her project would become. In the same way, I expected the Mojave Phone Booth website merely to take its place as just another goofball feature of my gigantic website consisting. thousands of pages of goofball features to which few people on the planet paid any attention at all.

The home page at Deuce of Clubs lists many official mottoes, but one motto I should probably add is: NOT EXACTLY A WIZARD AT KNOWING HOW PEOPLE WILL REACT TO THINGS. Fact is, I've always been completely useless as a taste forecaster. The first time I saw MTV, at a bagel shop next to the university, I turned to my friend Gordon and said, "Who'd ever sit around and watch this crap? I give it six months." So there's never been any point to my trying to predict how many people might interested in any given new feature at the Deuce of Clubs weird-o copia.[1] And anyway, as the great and culture maven Yo-Landi Vi$$er has observed, "All cool things happen by accident."

After the Booth was destroyed, some people harshly criticized me for writing about the Booth on Internet. Some still do. Given what eventually resulted, I would today almost certainly think twice, and probably even thrice, before putting up a website like that. We all know what the Internet is like these days. But you have to consider what the Internet was like in 1997. Probably most people reading this book weren't on the Internet in 1997. Hell, there were entire countries that were barely on the Internet in 1997. Many of you reading this might not even have been born by then and therefore might be only dimly a ware of how drastically different the Internet of the 1990s was from the Internet of today. For one thing, your parents weren't on it (thank Wotan!). For an unfortunately brief period of time, neither were corporations. At first there weren't even pictures on it, except for ASCII art. There was also less spam, almost no ads, and comparatively few computer viruses. In the Internet's cave epoch, one accessed the online world by means of tiny

monochrome monitors that displayed only text and were operated entirely by keyboard commands. Even by 1997 things were still comparatively primitive. If you want to see what the Internet looked like in 1997, take a look at DcuceOfClubs.com, because I've only slightly updated its look since then. Deuce of Clubs is so ridiculously ancient-looking that I sometimes call it a troglo-site.

At the time, then, documenting my experience with the Mojave Phone Booth wasn't something I would have had any reason to be a Hamlet about. When I made the Mojave Phone Booth website I was thinking the same thing I thought whenever I made web pages for Deuce of Clubs: namely, that if it appealed to me, it might appeal to people similar to me - in other words, probably about seventeen people, give or take, which is about how many people I expected to be interested in my transcription of a phone conversation I had with a person speaking to me from inside a telephone booth in the Mojave Desert.

It ended up taking very little time to find out how wrong I was about that.

As soon as I finished uploading the Mojave Phone Booth Project web page, I emailed the URL to everyone on the Deuce of Clubs site update notification list and waited for responses. Most interested, I thought, might be people who had visited my house and had therefore dialed, or been cajoled into dialing, the Booth's number themselves. Even more interested might be Girl Trouble, now that they had not only a website but an email address, which I used to clue them in to what they had helped bring into existence.

> To: girltroublehq
> Subject: greetings from arizona
> you finally got e-mail. congrats. but i bet you don't actually read e-mail, do you? my guess is that whoever made your website just prints it out & you read it on paper, am i night? well, you're going to have to find a net-connected computer now, so you can visit a portion of my website that resulted from our meeting in tempe, az a few months ago.

Bon responded quickly.

> From: girltroublehq
> Subject: Whoa!!
> Wow, we actually got somebody to e-mail us! Actually meeting Wagner was one of the high points of our trip. It was also great to finally meet you too. I'll get Tim (our boss, GT producer and in-law) to help me check out your home page in the next few days. This is something I do need assistance with. We'll look forward to seeing photos of us with Wagner so keep us posted when that happens. Kurt really missed out.
>
> The rest of our West Coast jaunt went well. When we played San Francisco we ended up putting Jello Biafra (that Dead Kennedys guy) on our guest list. We spread that around to all our punk rock friends. This impressed them so much that our rating has been upgraded from total nerds to kinda dorky.2

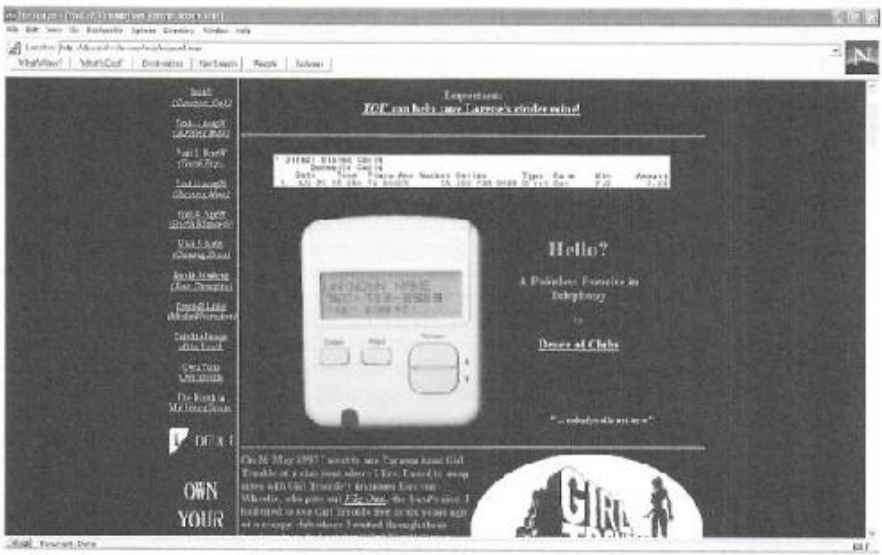
Bon then reported the news of the Booth to Girl Trouble fans worldwide via the Girl Trouble website:

> You no doubt recall the letter from Nick about the Mojave phone booth. Godfrey decided it was his quest to reach somebody on the number that Nick provided. I'm not going to tell you what

happened. You'll have to check that out for yourself on Godfrey's amazing page. Wagner has really gone high-tech.

Girl Trouble's enthusiasm notwithstanding, the Mojave Phone Booth Project was received at first exactly as I had expected it would be, appreciated by only a few. It assumed a modest spot among the many features and future courtroom exhibits at DeuceOfClubs.com (not for nothing is one of the Deuce of Clubs site mottoes *Laying the groundwork for an insanity plea sine 1995*).

Meanwhile, the Mojave Phone Booth Project was expanding, which means of course that a road trip was brewing.



NOTES

1 My lackumen® doesn't apply only to things I don't like. When l saw the first episode of *The X-Files*, I liked it so much that I decided to be sure to watch every episode, because I was convinced the show would be canceled within weeks. *The X-Files*, of course, became wildly popular. Feel free to consult me on any business opportunities you may be offered, or if you'd just like to license eminently trademarkable neologism lackumen®.

2 How charming and hilarious is Bon, huh?

BOOTHFARI:
OR,
THE QUEST TO - WAIT, YOU'RE
GONNA DO *WHAT*, NOW?

The greater the success, the more closely it verges upon failure.
- Robert Bresson

Even people whose religions incline them to pilgrimage typically limit themselves to one per lifetime. Me, I'm always ready for the hat-drop hajj. If road trips made a person holy, I'd have so many halos I'd be handing them out at Halloween. I'll take any excuse to head out among saguaro and creosote, or even just saltbush or brittlebush, if that's what you've got. But a phone booth in the middle of the desert? That's no excuse. That, *mis amigos*, is a *quest*.

I'm sometimes asked whether I'd have gone looking for the Booth if no one had ever answered any of my calls to it. I know for a fact that I would have because I still have recordings of phone calls I made to the Pacific Bell Telephone Company before I ever talked to Lorene, trying to enlist their help in my efforts to narrow down the Booth's location. It had to be the responsibility of *some* Pacific Bell department or employee to collect the Booth's coins and keep it in working order, and yet every Pacific Bell employee I talked to seemed flummoxed by my questions and gave me no useful answers.

As I've mentioned, some of my friends were also flummoxed by this quest of mine. A few - mostly those who didn't know me very well - were downright discouraging. I took comfort in knowing that when the sun goes red giant in five-and-a-half or so billion years and expands to a size that nearly swallows Earth's entire orbit, there'll be no one left to know anything at all about any of us or toss discouragement at anyone about anything. Ah, sweet

nectar of perspective! But until such time as either the sun dies or I do, I'll keep having my little adventures.

At the same time, the Mojave Phone Booth Project was at least partly about making connections. Obviously, one who cares about connections can't claim not to care what anyone thinks. As if to demonstrate the power of connections, my friend Professor Cardyhouse agreed to accompany me on my Booth adventure even though he would later admit that at the time he didn't really, as he puts it, "get the whole Booth thing."

I came to know Professor Cardyhouse through the mail, by way of his Detroit-based *X Magazine*, a humor and music zine one could easily have imagined being forced to display one of Tipper Gore's silly parental warning stickers, though not for sex or strong language but rather Strong Bowling Content, which is why as soon as I read about *X Magazine* in *Factsheet Five*, the zine of zine reviews, I stared sending Cardyhouse my Wagner zines in trade. Oddly enough, even after our first swap the kindly Professor was willing to keep swapping zines with me, even though his, unlike mine, did not appear to be the work of someone incarcerated for his own safety. Indeed, the Professor's professionally printed zine veered perilously close to resembling an actual newsstand magazine. That was one of the beauties of zine trading. You could send strangers photocopied pages of already murky snapshots featuring a busted-up statue of a dead composer and by return mail receive zine efforts ranging from something equally inept as yours to downright professional publications, with glossy, full-color covers and everything. Score!

After about five years of zine swapping, emails, and phone calls, I finally met Professor Cardyhouse in person in December of 1994 when I flew to Detroit to take possession of an art car named Lucky, whose roof had been completely sawed off by helpful *X Magazine* staff members and whose body featured paintings of Fisher-Price Little People. The car was to have been raffled off to some fortunate *X Magazine* reader, but the Professor called off the raffle and awarded me the car when I promised to drive the ersatz convertible from Michigan to Arizona in the dead of that year's especially cold winter, dressed the entire time as Santa Claus. And I tried, I really did, but after a single night's drive the car threw a rod in an Illinois town with the depressingly appropriate name of Normal. I memorialized the ill-fated trip in a video called *Wagnergnügen*, that I shot using a Fisher-Price PXL2000 toy video camera the Professor had sold me months earlier because, come to find out later, he believed it was broken. It later crossed my mind that awarding me the Lucky art car might have been the Professor's revenge.

My long and tragic history of driving utterly undependable vehicles convinced me I should instead rent a dependable vehicle if I really meant to

drive from Arizona to the Mojave Phone Booth and then on to Burning Man. (For readers unfamiliar with Burning Man, we can define it for our purposes as an annual northern Nevada desert festival of fire, art, destruction, and nudity - sort of a Dissonant Convergence, you could say.) On his way eastward from the Bay Area to northwestern Nevada for Burning Man, the Professor first flew southward to meet up with me in Phoenix. One might conclude from this that the Professor is not highly skilled at navigation, or that he really likes to road trip, or that he is just a really good pal. Events in our narrative will demonstrate that these are not mutually exclusive possibilities.

I have been advised that it's customary in stories to give physical descriptions of characters. Given that the Professor is a character in this story and also a character, period, fair enough. The first descriptive word that pops into my mind is *owlish*, but that could just be the Professor's round, Lennon-ish eyeglasses talking. Also, *owlish* might suggest *small*, which the Professor is not. He is quite tall. For that matter, many owls are larger than you might think. The great grey owl, for example, can be over 2-1/2 feet tall. At times the Professor's face reminds me of John Lennon, other times of Stephen Colbert I mean the Stephen Colbert character that Stephen Colbert used to play on TV, not the real Stephen Colbert.

Will that do for physical description, as least for now? I promise to include more Professorial descriptors in due course but, hey, look over here! It's some of the Professor's trip notes! As we go along I'll intersperse some of the notes Professor Cardyhouse made as we traveled. These are brief jottings of words and phrases and snippets of conversation that were intended to jog his memory later, when he fleshed out his erstwhile forthcoming full-fledged trip report that is no longer forthcoming because the Professor says the memories the notes were supposed to jog are now gone.

> Professor: What are we doing about the desert phone booth?
> Godfrey: I'm going to bring a signaling mirror. That's a good bet for rescue, I think. I mean, what's the worst thing that can happen?
> CUT TO: the worst thing that can possibly happen.

That last line became our trip's catch phrase. It's good to have a trip catch phrase when you're not entirely sure what you're doing, especially if what you're doing involves crossing deserts. Gallows humor is definitely desirable when crossing even one desert and on this trip, we would be crossing three, the Sonoran, the Mojave, and the Great Basin. Desert travel has always been dangerous. Before the automotive age, it usually involved a caravan of some sort: camel trains, horses, twenty-mule teams, what have you. Even today, one ought not to cross a desert lightly. What with the harsh treatment a desert can dole out to an automobile, it's still a good idea to travel with a caravan if you can. The Professor being the only one of my friends to accept my Booth Quest invitation, the nearest thing to a caravan I was able to organize was a Dodge Caravan I organized from a rental agency. Under the circumstances, a Dodge Caravan was caravan enough for us, for behold, we were on - and I wish a

book could have a megaphone to add extra emphasis to this made-up word - BOOTHFARI!

The only thing we needed from our Caravan was dependability throughout our 1,800-mile desert round trip. So wouldn't you just know it, after traveling only a few miles from the rental agency we began to hear a loud dinging sound coming from the back of the van. It was just after 10 a.m. but the temperature on that August day was already 90 degrees and climbing. I had hoped that by then we'd already be hours into our journey because to me what was almost as important as finding the Booth was finding it before sundown. As I repeatedly emphasized to the Professor, I really wanted to take in the whole Booth scene in the daylight. Besides, unless you 're searching for a star or a planet, it's a whole lot easier to search for something in the daylight than it is at night. In that we had gotten a late start as it was, any trouble with the van would eat up daylight we couldn't afford to lose.

It was a relief to realize after only a few seconds that the dinging was just the bell on my *Whipped Cream & Other Delights* Bike. Known as *Pedal It!* (after its inspirer, my Herb Alpert-themed art car *Whip It!*) or, alternately, *The Cream Pedaler* (I know, gross), the *Whipped Cream& Other Delights* Bike was built on an upside-down cruiser frame, with a long pipe for the seat post, so that the rider sat several feet higher off the ground than on a normal bike.

(From the Professor's trip notes)
Cream bike bell dinging
ding ... ding/

I intended for the Whipped Cream Bike to be my daily ride at Burning Man but its bell seemed ready to start the party early, ringing every time we hit a bump, or didn't hit a bump, or if the bell just felt like ringing, and if you were a bell, when would you *not* feel like ringing?

I was pretty sure I knew how the bell felt. Behind schedule though we were, I was happy to be on the road, happy to be heading for the Booth, and double happy to be driving a newer model vehicle than folks such as I are usually trusted to be in charge of.

The Professor also seemed fairly happy - he loves to road trip too - but he does have a tendency to drift toward the negative end of the mood scale. The dinging of the bike bell caused us to begin musing about how this desert trip might go and that's when the trip catch phrase I mentioned earlier was born: "What's the worst thing that could happen?" followed immediately by: (*sotto voce*) "Cut to: *the worst thing that could happen*."

I believed the worst thing that could happen had already happened the previous day, when I came home from work to find a tall pile of blackened, still-smoldering palm fronds in my driveway. One of my crazy neighbors (I had one on either side) informed me that lightning had struck one of the two tall palm trees beside my driveway, setting the top of it on fire. The lightning had bounced from the tree both to her house and mine, destroying her air

conditioner and both of my TVs. When she called to ask the city fire department to come deal with this fire in their city, they asked "Well, are any houses on fire?" No, she told them, but a tall palm tree standing between two houses was in flames. "Okay, then does it look like any houses are *about* to catch fire?" Even a crazy person was smart enough to admit she had no way of predicting that for sure, but she told them that both palm trees were within easy falling distance of both houses. At this, they leapt into action, which in government parlance means casually informing the caller that the rain would "probably" put out the fire, but that if the flaming tree should happen to fall down on a house and set it ablaze, she should then not hesitate to give them a call, and in the meantime have a nice day 'click'. Luckily for the public, always on the hook financially for official malfeasance against the public, the story docs not end with my endorsing the back of a settlement check for some unfairly discounted percentage of my flame-gutted home and its contents. Despite the fire having dumped loads of hot ashes onto my roof, it did not ignite, thank Wotan. When the burning masses of palm fronds fell, barely missing the house, they flamed out in heaps on my driveway. Definitely not the worst thing that could happen in a game where homes and lightning and burning palm fronds are involved.

I therefore had an unfounded Garp-ish confidence that our trip would be free of further disaster, but just as the Professor and I decided that the worst possible thing that could happen would be for a can of soup to break free and wedge itself under the Caravan's brake pedal (and we were traveling with no canned goods whatsoever), we realized that the worst thing that could possibly happen had already happened without our even noticing it. It was still warm inside the van, which meant the air conditioning system was not working. The fan was blowing strong, but the air it blew was not cool. And that was not cool. One might even say it blew.

Obviously, a lack of air conditioning wasn't really the worst thing that could have happened. I grew up in the desert driving cars with no air conditioning and was already a veteran of many a hot summer trip of multiple-thousand miles at the wheel of various clunkers that would break down regularly and not only lacked air conditioning but would overheat if I didn't run the heater full blast in my face the entire way. I would end up doing that many more times after this trip. The thing is, I'm willing to drive and swelter *except* when I am paying good money to a car rental agency for the privilege of driving and *not* sweltering. Moreover, the Professor is from Michigan, and I didn't want to find out how he'd hold up under adverse desert conditions. (Spoiler: later in these pages, you will find out exactly how he holds up under adverse desert conditions.)

Air conditioning had been a critical component of my plan to traverse nearly 2,000 miles of summertime desert in comfort. If a lack of A/C wasn't the worst thing that could possibly happen, it was definitely less than optimal. We continued along the freeway cursing not only the car rental agency that

had rented me the van but car rental agencies across the board. Heat can render one's mind somewhat immoderate. We debated whether we should just damn the heat and keep going and try for a refund later, or instead spend precious daylight returning to the airport to get a different van.

My desire to reach the Mojave Phone Booth in the daylight strongly motivated me to argue for the first option. We had only the upcoming afternoon and evening to spend at the Booth, assuming we could find it, after which we would need to return to civilization to find a motel for the night so that we could reach Burning Man the day we were supposed to. Time was therefore critical. My comprehensive and detailed travel plan, in so far as I had one, left no margin for backtracking to scream across car rental counters. There was no guarantee anyway that they'd even have another van available for the week-plus that we needed it. Especially if I screamed at them.

In light of these considerations, what was a little heat? Weren't we on our way to Burning Man, where we'd be camping out for over a week in 100+ degree heat, anyhow?

Not surprisingly, Michigander Cardyhouse was altogether unenthusiastic about my heat-drenched proposal. As we continued along the freeway debating courses of action, we were also frowning and fiddling with the van's instrument console. Suddenly - simultaneously - almost magically! - we experienced a eureka moment, or as close to one as such loons as the two of us are likely to experience. The combined processing power of our two brains had somehow pieced together a possible interpretation of a strange alchemical symbol on one of the van's control panel buttons.

Could that possibly be ... a snowflake?

One of us poked a finger at it, tentatively, the way time-traveling cave dwellers might poke at a slab of slightly wiggling dessert gelatin. Instantly, a magical whooshing sound filled the passenger compartment - *signs and wonders, whaddaya know: air conditioning!*

One head bonk apiece for Mssrs. Cardyhouse and Clubs.

[*Sing*] The snowflake button makes it cold, cold, cold.
- Phil Dunphy, *Modern Family*

I know. The decipherment of Linear B it wasn't. What can I say, I'm a desert rat. I don't know from snowflakes. I couldn't tell you my native Michigander friend's excuse, but ain't it grand that two guys who practically need a Rosetta Stone to figure out a dashboard button are off to try and navigate their way to a remote phone booth in the middle of a desert?[1]

You might be thinking, *This sounds like the kind of trip where someone gets stranded in the desert.*

You would be wrong.

But not by much. As you'll see in the next chapter, that kind of trip occurred *much* later.

Okay, only two months later.

The Professor and I continued to motor westward in luxurious air-conditioned comfort until the Professor saw a sign for Burnt Well Rest Stop, not even an hour west of Phoenix.

"Stop! Stop! STOP!"

The Professor was shouting as one expects an adult to shout only in case of serious emergency. Assuming it therefore to be one, I yanked the steering wheel to the right and veered the van onto the freeway exit ramp.

"What? What?" I kept asking. I'm aware that some people have bladder issues - as it happens, the Professor does - but that turned out not to be the issue here. I had to laugh when I found out that the emergency was that he wanted to take a photo of a saguaro cactus.

He did not appreciate the resulting levity. "Damn it!" he snapped, "I've never seen one before!"

I didn't admit it at the time but I didn't find the Professor's reaction to saguaros at all disproportionate to their majesty. It was a slightly more measured version of my eight-year-old cousin's reaction when he visited our tiny desert town and saw his first saguaros, causing him to squeal, "Oh, BOY, LOOKIT ALL THE COWBOY STICKS!" Granted, my cousin wasn't Shakespeare.. Then again, Shakespeare never saw a saguaro.

People are always photographing saguaros. Saguaros deserve to be photographed. I've spent my life in saguaro country and I still take photos of them all the time. (Have I mentioned my plan to take annual photographs of each of the hundreds of saguaros on my twenty desert mountainside acres and feature them on a website called AllMySaguarosHaveNames.com?)

So I shouldn't have laughed at Cardyhouse for wanting to take a few saguaro snapshots. It's a classic tourist maneuver and, after all, the Professor was a tourist - a very tall tourist, I might mention, if we were to pause here for the slightly more in-depth physical description of the Professor I promised you earlier. So, yeah: tall. Like, six-foot-four, maybe?[2] Along with his booming, radio quality voice, he really can give the impression of being somewhat professorial, hence the nickname I'm using throughout this book. It's also because he'd hire someone to stab me to death with candy cigarettes if I printed any of his other nicknames. The Cardyhouse part of the nickname is from his proprietorship of Cardhouse.com, which you should take a look at when you have a few hours to spare. (Somehow it has only just now occurred to me that both Cardyhouse and I gave our websites inauspicious playing card-related names. A house of cards and the lowest value card in the deck, that's us, all right.)

The Professor's dress and demeanor might attract one's notice if one happened to be, let's say, a mugger, or maybe a U.S. Border Patrol guard, although if there's anything the Professor does not resemble, it's a drug mule. For one thing, drug mules try to dress so as to blend in with the local

population. Cardyhouse mostly resembles a quiet, ivory-tower-ish scholar who although tall also seems kind of breakable. If you didn't buy that he's a professor, his manner might lead you to guess that he's a computer programmer. If you did, your friends should congratulate you at the beginning of a great career of Sherlock Holmes impersonation because the Professor is indeed a computer programmer. A computer programmer with needs. At a rest stop an hour west of downtown Phoenix. he needed a photo of a saguaro. Fair enough.

In 2007 I asked the Professor, who had by then lived in Arizona for a little while before moving back to the Bay Area, whether he had even kept any of the saguaro photos from that day. "It's funny you should ask that," he said. "About a year ago, I was going through all my photos and found a group that was set aside from everything else. It took me two weeks to figure out why I had nine or ten photos of a saguaro until I realized those were from that first time I'd seen one!"

After our impromptu rest stop photo shoot, small desert towns came and went - Quartzsite, Parker, Earp, Needles. Getting from Phoenix to what the map said should be the general district of the Booth was a full day's journey. I usually like all-day desert driving. Desert miles are good miles, and although I could name a fleet's worth of automobiles I've owned over the years that have disagreed with me on that point, I say there can't be enough desert miles, except when I'm hoping for a fighting chance to search for a Phone Booth in the light of day, daylight generally being in more copious supply before the sun goes down than after.

To save time, I took a shortcut westward across the high desert through Searchlight, Nevada, a town whose name I hoped wouldn't prove itself a disastrous omen. It turned out not to be an omen of disaster but a disaster itself. Searchlight was where our desert journey was unfortunately extended by the length of a burrito.

It seems the esteemed Professor somehow hadn't caught on to this whole atmosphere of hurrying and rushing I'd been trying to create all day long by driving faster than legally allowed with stops only to take on fuel or offload pee (or take snapshots of saguaros). All my chatter about the necessity for speed and the importance of getting to the Booth while the sun was still up had evidently made no impression at all on the Professor, who refused to be talked out of stopping for what he kept calling "a sit-down meal."

I didn't know Cardyhouse well at the time, so I assumed there had to be some legitimate reason for his insistence. A medical condition, maybe? Is there some medically established condition that renders a person unwilling to get his food to go, even on a trip whose purpose is to find an almost certainly hard to-find Phone Booth before the sun goes down? Long after this trip, I found out there was no medical condition, unless you count an almost superhuman obliviousness. As I mentioned before, the Professor has his needs. He's just not necessarily the best at being tuned in to other people's

needs. Like all of us, he wants what he wants, and right then he wanted a burrito. Knowing the Professor as I now do, none of this is surprising. I soon learned to be more blunt with him. He'll even ask you to do that, once he gets to know you. At the time, however, all I knew was that earlier he had needed to take a snapshot of a saguaro and now he needed a "sit-down" burrito.

My needs that day did not include food. I rarely eat meals when I road trip, anyhow. I generally eat road food when I road trip, and by *road food* I don't mean fake 1950s diners with non-period jukeboxes. I mean two Hostess Cupcakes washed down with half a pint of half-and-half. What I needed was speed - not trUcker speed, or at least not the pharmaceutical kind, but the kind of speed that racks up a whole lot of miles real quick. All I wanted to eat was a whole bunch of highway.

Reluctantly, I pulled in at some crappy roadside joint - there wasn't a lot to choose from in Searchlight, Nevada - and the Professor ordered his sit-down burrito, which took so long to be served that I assumed the cook had to have been sitting down, too. I did not eat but only watched the sunlight through the window make longer and longer shadows on the restaurant floor as I tried to nudge Cardyhouse to at least chew his very-extremely-critical-crucial sit-down god-damned burrito a little faster, repeating various giddyup phrases such as "Burnin' daylight, here!" and "Head 'em up 'n' move 'em out!" Apparently they don't use such phrases in Michigan nor pay any heed to those who do. Though an actual flesh-and-blood human sat before me, I may as well have been administering a Turing test to a robot. (Come to think of it, at the risk of a candy cigarette stabbing I'll tell you that one of Cardyhouse's other nicknames is Cardhouse Robot.) I shifted and fidgeted in my seat as portentously and theatrically as I knew how and kept up my irritating mutterings as the Professor heedlessly plodded through his burrito at a leisurely pace.

Once we finally got back on the road, the van did its best to make as short work as possible of highway 164, which would get us to Interstate 15 and the Cima exit. I'm usually a chatterbox when I road trip, especially in the desert, but I can get kind of quiet when I'm annoyed. The Professor is apt to be kind of quiet anyway, so it was pretty quiet in that van for a while. I can't stay annoyed for long in a desert, though. Twenty miles down the road and we were chatting amiably as we passed through Nipton, Nevada.

Nipton has been described by Mojave Desert expert Dennis Casebier as "an up-and-coming town featuring a general store, Nipton Mercantile, a restaurant, and other enterprises. There is water available. Gasoline is expected to be available there in the not-too-distant future." Nipton has been described by my Las Vegas pal Sarah Jane as "just a smattering of trailers sneezed onto a railroad crossing by a vengeful desert God," although she adds, "It's really a cool place, and if I had any friends out here, I'd tow my pop up camper here and camp out for a week." I remember Nipton mainly as the first of many places over the ensuing years where the Professor would laugh

at my passing-through-a-desert-town habit of remarking, "Yeah. I could live here."

Nipton is hardly the best place to suffer from a digestive complaint, but hardly had we reached it when the Professor began mentioning certain effects of his sit-down burrito. (Traveler's advisory: Road burritos are like Frozen Bug: NOT RECOMMENDED.) I admit I don't recall much sympathy radiating from the driver's side of the van toward the passenger's side. Even if it had been the best burrito in the history of burritos, on that trip, on that day, no burrito could possibly have been worth the cost in daylight.

Our unplanned-for time crunch gave me even more reason to hope the map I'd brought along was accurate. It was a photocopy of a map, actually, with the route to the Mojave Phone Booth marked out in thick, orange highlighter ink. I regarded it as dependable because I had received it directly from the best possible source, the Mojave Desert expert I quoted a couple of paragraphs ago, Mr. Dennis Casebier.

"Huh."

On the same day I uploaded the Mojave Phone Booth story to DeuceOfClubs.com, I was hunting for a book in my library when my eye landed instead on a different book, one with the word *Mojave* in its tile. It was a book I'd forgotten I owned. It goes for quite a bit online now, but I paid only $1.99 for it at a thrift store. One of only 1,200 privately-printed copies, it's an authoritative guide to the Mojave Road and cnvirons by Dennis Casebier. Partly to acknowledge such a striking coincidence but mostly because I was still looking for directions to the Booth, I hunted up Casebier's phone number and dialed it. On the phone he sounded taciturn and somewhat skeptical at first, but he patiently listened to my story and ended up offering valuable assistance.

Dennis Casebier: Hello?
Me: Hello, is this Dennis?
Yes.
Are you the author of the Mojave books?
Yes, I've done some books on the Mojave, yeah.
Well, I have a question for you. I'm looking for a phone booth.
A phone booth.
There is a phone booth in the Mojave Desert, and it's maybe fifteen miles off of I15. Does that ring a bell at all?
Uhhh ... *[Starts laughing]*
Probably the strangest question you've had all day.
Tell me more about it.
Okay, here's the thing. I was calling this phone booth. I just figured, just

for the hell of it, I would call this phone booth every day. Just to see if anybody would ever answer, 'cos I thought it was weird - why would there be a phone booth in the middle of nowhere? So one day, less than a month after I started doing this, I got a busy signal. So I just kept calling back till it rang again and this lady picked up -

[Casebier laughs]

- named, I think it was Lorene - does that ring a bell?

Lorene Caffee?

She said her family's had the cinder mine out there for years.

Oh, I know who - I know where you're at.

She said she comes in to use the phone every now and again. And so I'm going to go up to this festival called Burning Man, which is up in northern Nevada, over Labor Day. But on the way there, I want to go visit this phone booth. But, dumb me, I didn't get an exact fix on where this phone booth is.

Huh. Where do you live?

Arizona.

Uh - how'd you get the number?

Well, I have these friends who put out a magazine.

Yeah?

And they also have a band. They came through town and played right near my house, so they gave me the latest copy of their magazine, and there was this letter to the editor - this guy had written in, apropos of I don't know what, but he said that he had seen it on a map, that it said "TELEPHONE," and he thought that was weird, so he drove out there from L.A. in his jeep and found the thing. He was amazed it was working and couldn't figure out why it would be there. And the phone number was in there, and I just figured, I'll just call it -

Call the phone number!

Just to see, you know?

Well, first off, my reaction would be you've got too much time on your hands.

Oh, you have no idea.

Fifteen miles, let's see. All right, now, what do you want to know?

I want to know what would be the best way I would get to it.

Get off on the Cima exit. Do you have a map that shows it?

Well, I've got a Rand McNally map, so it's not real detailed, and then I've got the one that's in your book.

Which book?

It's odd, I just happened to pick that up.

Which book do you have?

Reopening the Mojave Road.

Oh, I see. Now, that's a different one. That's a different phone booth.

What, did you mention a phone booth in here?

Yeah.
Oh, really? I was looking in here to see if there was any mention! Because I just stumbled across this, I forgot I had it. I've got thousands of books, and I was looking for another book today and I saw "Mojave." So I've been looking through it.
Now, what you really need is - 15 miles - I'm going to add up these mileages, here, let's see, it comes out to be about 12 miles from I-15. Now when are you going to do this?
This is going to be around Labor Day.
Here's what we'll do. I'm sittin' here holding the auto club's San Bernardino County map. It shows it on there. "TELEPHONE." I'll send you a Xerox.
Oh, yeah? That'd be cool!
And it shows "TELEPHONE." I know that's the one you're talking about.
She said it's all shot up.
Yup. All right, give me your name and address. I'll do it right now and stick it in the mail tomorrow morning. We do a little newsletter. Just for the hell of it, I'll send you one.
That would be great.
Might enrich your visit to this region.
Thanks!
I might use a highlighter on the - do you have four-wheel drive?
I'm going to be renting something. Am I going to need four-wheel drive?
Oh, not especially, as long as you just stay on the direct route. And carry a lot of water with you, 'cos you're gonna be 12 miles from ... anything.
I appreciate your help.
You're welcome.
I'll talk to you later, then.
Bye.

Mr. Casebier wasn't the first, and wouldn't be the last, to consider me a little questionable for traveling hundreds of miles to visit a telephone booth, though he'd later tell a reporter preparing an article about the Booth that whatever gets people out into the desert to explore was fine by him. He also wasn't the first - not by a long shot - to utter in conjunction with the Mojave Phone Booth Project what I came to call The Phrase That Is Not To Be Uttered: *"too much time on your hands."* I couldn't have imagined, with the eventual snowballing of the Booth phenomenon, how many more times I would hear that phrase. But I was impressed by how friendly and helpful Mr. Casebier was, all the more so a short while later when I received in the mail the promised map marked with the route to the Booth. I'd be willing to bet that not for a single moment did Dennis Casebier suppose he would ever hear

from me again.

Cima Exit

> Man's life is divided into two phases:
> 1. Childhood, and
> 2. Navigation.
>
> - Graham Chapman, *A Liar's Autobiography*

Once we reached Interstate 15 it was time to start keeping an eye open for the Cima exit, roughly midway between Las Vegas and Barstow. Many drivers regard this long stretch of sublime and subtly changing desert views in much the same way they regard the lands they dismiss as "flyover country" (an expression I think says more about those who use it than about any territory it purports to describe). Most travelers who stop at the Cima exit do so only because they have to. They fuel up, stretch their legs, use the bathroom and, seeing no further gain to be had in the desert, hurry off to lose money in Vegas or tell lies back in Los Angeles about having lost money in Vegas. To such people, places in between LA and Vegas are nowheres that just happen to lie in between somewheres.

Although I freely use phrases such as "middle of nowhere," it's not with derisive intent. Most nowheres interest me more than the usual somewheres. The desert surrounding the Cima exit gave me the feeling one often gets when road tripping, that obvious yet odd recognition that somebody lives in this place, just as I live in another place, and that nearly every place is someplace to somebody. One can't be reminded often enough, or strongly enough, that the universe has no center, so unless everywhere is noplace then there is no place that is truly noplace.

The only businesses at the Cima exit were a gas station and towing operation, both housed in a structure whose roof shape advertised its origin as a Stuckey's travel store. Any towing business alongside a desert freeway has the potential to be the source of a not inconsiderable livelihood, given the desert's notoriously brutal treatment of motor vehicles. Cima means summit and the several summit climbs along this stretch of I-15 combine with the summer heat to make travel tough enough to keep the station's tow yard filled with abandoned vehicles.

I never go into an area with which I'm unfamiliar without topping off my fuel tank (and spare gas cans, if I'm smart enough to be carrying any). I fueled up as quickly as I could, to save daylight. In economics, the term *opportunity cost* refers to opportunities foregone or lost in the choice of one expenditure rather than another. To give you an example at random, the opponunity cost of the Professor's three-dollar sit-down burrito was an hour's worth of

daylight. We really could have used that hour right about then, but there's no use crying over spilled beans.[3] We'd just have to do the best we could, as quickly as we could.

The map in my head had gotten us this far. From here, Professor Cardyhouse would take over navigational duties, which amounted to nothing more than making sure I followed the course indicated by the thick, bright highlighter line Dennis Casebier had carefully marked on the photocopied map he'd kindly mailed me. The final phase of our search would take place on dirt roads or possibly only jeep trails - it wasn't clear from the map.

As if placed purely for our benefit, a home-made sign maybe a hundred feet from the Cima gas station pointed the way to Aiken Cinder Mine. Dennis Casebier had marked the Aiken Cinder Mine on his home made map. The sign was bent, rendering it somewhat ambiguous, but it appeared to point down Cima Road. The guy sitting next to me holding the map confirmed that this was indeed the correct direction, so off we zoomed, paying not the slightest notice to the fine-powdered dirt road that veered off to our right, the very road, as it turned out, that was clearly marked in screaming orange highlighter on Mr. Casebier's map. With precious sunshine fast draining away, we went speeding off merrily in the wrong direction across Cima Dome. And the Whipped Cream Bike's bell said,

ding

Cima Dome is the dominant geographical feature in the area. 1,500 feet high, covering about 75 square miles, the dome is what's left of an ancient mountain range and around 30 extinct volcanoes only about a thousand years old that left behind large volcanic cinder deposits and cinder cones. These cones will figure into our story later and appeared to have figured into Cima Road itself - a number of paved roads through the Mojave seemed to have been surfaced with some mixture of asphalt and the local volcanic cinder, giving the driving surface an unusual reddish color, especially with the sunlight hitting it from low in the sky. The condition of Cima Road suggested it had been recently paved, so we were at least able to cruise along at a pretty good clip.

As we crested one small hill, a desert tortoise ambling across Cima Road came into view suddenly, saw us, and pulled his head and legs into his shell just as tortoises do in cartoons and just as quickly. I looked in the rear view mirror and was relieved to see that the van's tires had missed it. The Professor and I said nothing for about thirty seconds, then simultaneously asked, *Did you see that?* and laughed our heads off. Before we knew it, we'd laughed ourselves so far off course that we found ourselves at a crossroads. Or, as the Professor wrote in his trip notes, "whoops, went to Cima."

On a map Cima might look like a town, but one quick look at the tiny

market and one had seen what there was to see in Cima. There was a payphone outside the store, but it obviously wasn't the payphone we were looking for. For one thing, the phone was enclosed by a kiosk, not a booth. More definitively, Lorene's and Dennis's descriptions, not to mention my own aesthetic demands, made it certain that the Mojave Phone Booth couldn't possibly be next to a paved road. Besides, we had traveled farther than the 12-1/2 miles the Booth was supposed to be from the gas station.

It appeared we had somehow managed to become lost. It didn't make sense. I asked Cardyhouse if I could take a look at the map. Mr. Casebier had told me his photocopied map should be all we needed to find our way to the Booth. And it sure should have been. It didn't take but a glance to pinpoint the source of our problem. The Professor had been holding Casebier's map upside-down.

ding.

I don't know, maybe native Michiganders aren't used to navigating without tens of thousands of trees blocking the view in all directions, or maybe people in forested lands develop the uncanny ability to become confused when faced with three hundred and sixty degrees of unimpeded views of major navigational landmarks, such as mountains, say, or stars, chief among which is the star nearest us, a star many refer to as *the Sun*, which was at that moment setting, as it very nearly always does, in *the West*, one of four cardinal directions typically marked very clearly on maps - "as clear as daylight," as the expression goes. Or maybe the map needed an even more conspicuous symbol to indicate North. A snowflake, perhaps?

Or maybe this was just one more thing I could blame on that stupid burrito.

(From the Professor's trip notes)
navigational oops - aiken cinder mine
This is my second strike. What's happening?

"I was sure we were going to find the Booth," the Professor says now. "Because *we had the map.* But, you know, *following* the map seemed to be the problem I was having."

I had at that point corresponded and conversed with the Professor for years. I knew he grasped both spoken and written English (although I might not always say that when trying to parse some of his detailed yet unintentionally cryptic emails). Furthermore, I often consult him for information regarding fonts, candy cigarettes, and matters concerning the graphic arts (snowflake symbols excepted). Somehow, though, during our day-long trip through the desert, the Professor had never gotten around to mentioning that he'd never had any right-side-up training.

Nowadays he still frames that day's map foul-up in terms either sociological - "People use maps in different ways"- or environmental - "My

poor navigational skills almost caused the death of a turtle." [4]

CIMA reaction: an oscillitory chemical reaction involving chlorite and iodide ions and malonic acid in a thin layer of gel that was continuously fed from opposite directions with fresh reagents
- Phillip Ball, *The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature*

I know next to nothing about chemistry but I knew I was having a Cima reaction of some sort and that it mostly involved one chemical, adrenaline. Our little comedy of errors was getting less comical by the minute. Not long ago, both Cardyhouse and I happened to be reading the same book about Bill Drummond's and Jimmy Cauty's band, The KLF. Cardyhouse emailed, "I'm getting the feeling that Jimmy and Bill had a touch of that, oh, what's it called when two people go off the rails together." My response was, "I have no idea, but whatever it is, I HAVE TO ADD THAT TO THE BOOK." So here it is: it's called *folie à deux*, "a psychiatric syndrome in which symptoms of a delusional belief are transmitted from one individual to another." That's what it felt like on that day in the Mojave, except it wasn't altogether clear whether I was transmitting madness to Cardyhouse or vice versa.

Fortunately, sometimes the simplest thing can change one's entire outlook - just some random thing, such as, oh, I don't know, say, pressing a button with an icon that turns out to be a snowflake, or maybe even just turning a map right-side up.

Two things instantly became obvious. First, we should have just kept heading toward the sinking sun. Second, the Professor should no longer be allowed to navigate.

We were now about 16 miles from where we should have turned off in the first place. We had therefore to backtrack 16 miles just to return to our starting point. From there we would be, once again, 12-1/2 miles from the Mojave Phone Booth. Theoretically, that is. We still had to find the thing.

There was nothing to do but laugh it off and head back up Cima Road to the old Stuckey's building, which we reached as the late afternoon was turning into early evening. The wrong turn had cost us 45 minutes and most of our remaining daylight.

After our long and needless detour, I should have stopped in at the gas station to ask whether they knew about the Booth and, if so, could they please tell us whether we were about to take the correct trail to it. I'm not one of those people who won't ask for directions or admit to being lost. And we now had plenty of time to ask because, assuming we managed to hold the map right-side-up long enough to find the Booth, it'd be dark before we could get anywhere near it. The possibility of reaching it in photo-friendly sunlight was now squelched. Besides, I figured that asking directions would likely produce one of two outcomes. Either they wouldn't know about the Booth and think, *Are these guys nuts?* or they would know about the Booth, and think, *These*

guys are definitely nuts. I'm way past the desensitization point where people thinking I'm nuts is concerned. It's just that when people who live in remote places think someone's nuts, they often grab hold of the chance to mess with them. (As someone who has lived in remote places, I can be trusted on that point.) So I wouldn't have been sure I could trust any directions they gave anyhow.

Instead, I chose just to draw back the bow and let my arrow fly. I was going to find this desert phone booth if I had to drive every dirt road in the Mojave. "Failure is not an option," said the voice of the NASA mission control boss in my head, or maybe it was the voice of one of my childhood baseball coaches (after you've been driving all day long in the desert, the voices in one's head all start to sound remarkably similar).

Had I been in a mood to face facts, I'd have seen it as likely that if the day ended as it gone so far, failure wasn't merely an option, it was damn near an inevitability. But I wasn't in a mood to face facts because I wasn't in a mood to continue on to Burning Man without having found the Mojave Phone Booth. I was sure that Apollo astronauts would have understood. Even though it meant the saving of their lives, I'll bet two of those Apollo 13 astronauts were still a little cranky about returning to Earth without having gotten any moon dust on their boots. So for me the cry remained, in the words of Sam Spade, "Let's get to a phone booth!"

At the dirt road within sight of the Cima exit gas station - indeed, precisely where Casebier's carefully marked map clearly indicated we should have turned in the first place - stood a small row of mailboxes belonging to area residents. With the sun all but lost anyway, I took a few moments to leave a warm, personal note for Lorene inside of what, based on no evidence whatsoever, I merely presumed must be her mailbox. Some months later I received a friendly postcard from a completely unrelated desert dweller who warmly invited me to stop by next time I passed through the area.[5]

(From the Professor' trip notes)
BLAH BLAH BLAH
NOT MAINTAINED
BLAH BLAH BLAH
NOT RESPONSIBLE
BLAH - gov't road sign at dirt road turn-off

Oh, whatever, road sign. I "True Love Travels on a Gravel Road," how much of an impediment to a desert phone booth infatuation could a dirt road be? Even with darkness fast falling on us, it somehow still seemed like the best idea ever to set out on a dirt trail heading off into a massive desert wilderness entirely unfamiliar to me. Yet I was positively brimming with confidence, because check it out, right-side-up map! If nothing else, we had narrowed down the theoretical options for directional error. Having already breezed down 16 miles' worth of one incorrect option, there was now a better chance, if only mathematically, that we might actually be rumbling down the

right trail this time. The furrowed, washboard dirt road was what you might call a martini road - James Bond could have funneled vodka and vermouth right into his belly and the road would have taken care of the shaking. Some of it seemed less like road than roadbed that had not yet been all the way prepared for someone to build a real road on top of it. Better than a jeep trail, more primitive than a collector road, it was the sort of road that causes people unaccustomed to wilderness driving to glance at their vehicle's odometer about once every tenth of a mile, hoping it will have advanced more than it has. It was a road ribbed for no one's pleasure, except for maybe the 'Whipped Cream Bike, which was having a grand old time going "ding ... ding, ding ... ding." There was during this period a Chevron ad campaign that said, "Dings are inevitable" and on this trip, were they ever.

I don't know whether the Professor would have called it a grand old time - he admitted later to having been apprehensive at this stage of the journey - but I have some idea of what the rental van, granted the power of human speech, might have used it to say to me. At the end of snow skiing trips in high school, my friends and I would sometimes skip the shuttle bus ride to the parking lot at the bottom of the mountain and instead just ski all the way down the icy, gravelly road. Did you know that, unlike personally owned skis, rented skis are impervious to damage by pebbles or gravel? It's a science fact and I was now driving the rental van in that same spirit, pitilessly gunning the poor machine along that punishing road. In your face, snowflake button!

As we bounced along, the sky and surroundings darkened. People traveling tiny dirt roads in the remote desert are often surprised at how little their vehicle's headlamps show them. Because desert roads often twist around like sandy washes, the inability to see the sun or any landmarks can make it easy to lose your bearings. You might know you're supposed to be heading in a certain cardinal direction, but when darkness is shrouding the mountains, every bend in the road is a question mark keeping you in suspense as to whether you 're still going in the direction you intended. A car in a city at night barely needs its own lights. On a forest road, where all one can see is an endless corridor of green drapery on either side anyway, nighttime merely means darker blobs of drapery - one might as well be driving through an endless cornfield. But anyone who's ever wandered a desert well knows the sorts of grand vistas the darkness is concealing.

We just followed the light of the headlamps while unknowingly passing landmarks that would become familiar on future trips to the Booth. We saw a few cows but none of the wild burros that populated the area, descended from escaped or abandoned prospectors' burros. We didn't even see any coyotes. Other than the dirt road in front of us, we saw only blackness. I thought of some lines from my second-favorite poem: "As I came through the desert thus it was, / As I came through the desert: All was black."

After bumping along in the dirt for what felt like hours but was really more like half an hour, we thought we spotted something in the near distance.

Could that be ... a line of telephone poles?

It was!

In the space of a moment, instead of the bravado that had been pushing me on, I was flooded with genuine, no-foolin' confidence. When you're hunting a phone booth, phone poles just can't be surpassed as game sign. Now we were all but certain we were on the right track. All we had to do was follow the poles, and there was no choice about that, because the road now turned to run parallel to them.

A short while later, maybe 45 minutes past dark, having traversed a dozen and a half miles of rutted road that felt like fifty, I brought the van to a halt.

Directly in the beam of the headlamps stood The Mojave Phone Booth.

I'm in a Phone Booth, Baby

> Shadows shake in the lamplight
> No writer could explain
>
> - Ian Hunter, "When the Daylight Comes"

The bare sight of a phone booth in a desert could not have appeared before happier eyes than mine. There, in the middle of the Mojave,just as sure as we were two guys who couldn't decipher a snowflake button, stood an honest-to-Pete telephone booth, outfitted with a payphone and everything.

The Mojave Phone Booth was *real*.

I mean, *really* real. It *existed, truly* existed, in space and in time. You could touch it (I did). It had shape (that of a phone booth). It had size (ditto). It was in reality just as I had envisioned it: a solitary communications outpost along a chain of telephone poles in a landscape dotted with Joshua trees. Dust raised by the van's tires glittered in beams from the van's headlamps through bullet holes that pocked the Booth's frame. From the desert floor thousands of fragments that once formed the Booth's glass panes reflected light back to us in sparkles. The whole scene was so beautiful as to be almost otherworldly. Doubting Thomas wouldn't have needed to put his finger into the bullet holes to embrace this vision.

To give the Professor and his burrito their due, arriving at night made for a dramatic and spectacular introduction to the Booth. Had we arrived in the daylight, we'd have spotted the Booth from a quarter mile away as the van descended the gentle hill that formed the final approach. But in the dark it wasn't until we rounded a short quarter-turn that the van's headlamps lit up the Booth. It was quite a moment.

I'm sure a few phone booths in the world have on occasion caused passersby to scratch their heads and wonder, "Why would anyone ever have put a phone booth *here?*" But believe me, you never saw a truly *isolated* phone booth until you saw the Mojave Phone Booth. The desert through which the 15 freeway runs between Los Angeles and Las Vegas is isolated as

it is, and the Booth stood another 12-1/2 miles away from whatever token amount of civilization is represented hy a remote stretch of Interstate.

Looking at the Booth, I thought of Coleridge's "miracle of rare device." Although I was sober, I'll bet I felt higher than Coleridge allegedly was when *Kubla Khan* came spilling out of him. Alone among all the hundreds of thousands of utility poles intruding through remote desert areas carrying electricity and conversations to far-off cities, this remote desert telephone pole had a standard telephone booth - such as were already being removed as outdated relics from street comers around the globe - sidling up to stake its claim by siphoning off a little bit of modem convenience for the desert.

"Outsider archaeologists" sometimes use the term **OOPArt**, which stands for **O**ut **O**f **P**lace **Art**ifact, that is, an object regarded as having been found where it ought not to be, according to some accepted system of reckoning. I'm no bigger believer in outsider archaeology than I am in plenty of more widely accepted systems of reckoning, but what I reckoned was that the Mojave Phone Booth was about as OOP an Art as I'd ever seen. It was as if the Booth were the sole remaining artifact of a lost city in a place where no city had ever existed. The proximity of Las Vegas and Los Angeles almost suggested that the Booth's location could have been decided by a throw of dice or as the outcome of a bet, or an absurdist prank by some Hollywood set designer.

Save only for the lack of saguaros, the entire scene appeared as if it had been designed expressly to fit my own personal specifications of a desert paradise. This was expectancy violation reified, aluminum-clad recontextualization. Wagner, that master shifter of context, must have been green with envy. Me, I was every shade of happy. I was one happy chappy.

Unusual things are liable to happen whenever someone in a comic book, movie, or TV show ducks into a phone booth. A person might emerge as a

superhero, like Superman, or in another time or place, like Bill and Ted or Dr. Who, or in the underground headquarters of a spy agency, like Maxwell Smart.

As I stepped into the Mojave Phone Booth, I didn't sense any new-found superpowers. But I did experience a strong sense of being whisked away somewhere, somewhere *other*.

The first thing to do, obviously, was to pick up the receiver and find out whether the Booth phone had a dial tone.

It did.

The sound of that dial tone made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. A dial tone - the symbolic sound of connectedness in a place where the usual sounds are those of winds blowing and cows lowing and burros braying and coyotes cachinnating - that sound alone almost fulfilled my Phone Booth quest.

But not quite.

Because as the blues song says, "I'm in a Phone Booth, Baby." And I'm gonna call and tell you all about it.

You Never Know What's Going to Happen When the Phone Rings

> The first thing I did....I went into this phone booth.
> I felt like giving somebody a buzz.
> Where ya callin' from? Where ya at now, anyways?"
> Me? Tm in a phone booth."
> I stayed in the damn phone booth for quite a while.
> I kept holding onto the phone, sort of,
> so I wouldn't pass out.
>
> - Holden Caulfield

From the night I first heard about it until the day I left home to find it, I had placed hundreds of calls to the Mojave Phone Booth. Only one of those calls had been answered, by Lorene. Had the stars been lined up to perfection, my first call *from* the Mojave Phone Booth would also have been to Lorene. But seeing as how the stars had just stood by and watched while we took a wrong turn on the way to the Booth, it seemed we were doing without any help from the heavens. Plus, the only number I had for Lorene was the number of the Phone Booth in which I was standing, which didn't promise to work out all that well. Thanks a bunch, stars.

I had, however, brought along another Mojave Desert phone number and therefore the honor of my first official call from the Mojave Phone Booth went to Mr. Dennis Casebier.

Dennis Casebier: Hello?

Dennis!

Yes.

It's Godfrey. We spoke a few months ago about that Phone Booth in the Mojave Desert -

Yes. Uh-huh.

Well, uh ... here I am!

[Casebier starts laughing]

I'm at the Phone Booth.

Ain't you the one!

I have arrived.

How's it feel?

It feels *beautiful*! Except we got here and it was dark. We took a few wrong turns. But we found it, and it's pretty much the way that we imagined it.

The map that I gave you was adequate?

Absolutely, and I want to thank you again for sending the map and for the newsletter. I really enjoyed reading that, and, well, I couldn't have done it without you, Dennis.

Good! I think I put that in my last newsletter that you were going to do that.

Did you really?

Yeah. I mentioned it under the heading, "You Never Know What's Going to Happen When the Phone Rings."

Indeed, where the Mojave Phone Booth was concerned, one really didn't know what was going to happen when the phone rang. Lorene and I had found that out. So, for a second time, had Dennis Casebier. So would a few other people that night, as Professor C. and I began placing phone calls to anyone whose number we could remember or had remembered to bring along.

"Happiness will only cost you one thin dime," sang the great Bettye LaVette. As it happened, we hadn't brought any dimes, but it didn't matter because we'd have needed not only dimes but quarters too because by 1997 phone companies had raised the price of a local phone call to 35 cents, not that we knew the number of anyone "local" to this locale, anyhow. Every number we could have thought of was a long distance call from the Booth.

The idea of dropping coins into an isolated phone booth sounds romantic until you've tried dropping in enough coins for a long distance call. Surprisingly, Cardyhouse and I had both remembered to bring along our calling cards and took turns using them. As one of us tried to contact the outside world using the Booth's phone, the other took photographs or just took in the scene. It looked for a few minutes as though we were going to have as hard a time reaching anyone *from* the Booth as I'd had reaching anyone at the Booth. All we kept getting were ringing lines and answering machines. Remember answering machines? Sort of steampunk voicemail, or whatever? Well, we left a lot of steampunk voicemails that night.

We did finally reach a few people, mostly zine friends, which I appreciated as thematically appropriate to the project. I'm sure we sounded like the goobers who used to make phone calls from airplanes when seatback phones first came out, just to say, *You'll never guess where I'm calling you from, haw haw!*

It was now fully dark, but August desert nights are generally comfortably warm. The air was calm and the skies clear directly over the area of the Booth, but we could see storm clouds and lightning flashes in nearly every direction. Our voices had to compete with periodic interference on the line that crackled in sync with the lightning. The pops and clicks made it sound almost as if we were conversing through a Geiger counter instead of a telephone, even more so than during my first conversation with Lorene.

The whole time my head was buzzing with the temporal and technological incongruity of the situation. There I was, talking to pals in cities while standing in an ancient volcanic field in a desert, using a modern pay telephone that even in 1997 seemed technologically antiquated, while in the distance wild burros and free-range cattle made competing background noises in a desert fragrant with the smell of wet creosote mixed with ozone generated by the electrical storms ranged all around us.

The situation and sound quality of the phone line reminded me of the time I answered the phone as a teenager and heard my name, followed by crackling, walkie-talkie static. It was a friend phoning from Arizona's Mazatzal Wilderness using a portable ham radio that made use of repeaters - small receiving and transmitting stations atop mountains and towers - to pass the signal to phone operators who would then patch the call into regular phone lines.

That was a revelation to me. As a kid, I loved reading about 19th-century Arizona's system of heliographs, which were mirrored contraptions that used reflected sunlight to relay signals and messages from mountain peak to mountain peak for hundreds of miles across Apache territory - basically, an up market yet less efficient version of the mirrors and smoke signals the Apaches themselves had long been using to communicate the approach of trespassers, visible to Apache eyes a full day's ride away.

With the demise of both smoke signals and heliography, I had imagined that the secluded wildernesses of Arizona had again become as incommunicado as they had been when Arizona was sparsely inhabited. But after that phone call from the wilderness, I always took notice of repeaters in remote places and thought about their power to enable someone in a wilderness to phone a friend in a city to say hello just because it was possible - exactly as we were doing that night at the Mojave Phone Booth, standing inside a box that represented what once was the very frontier of remote communication.

That constituted a lot of the magic of it: it was the experience of being in contact in an otherwise uncontactable place, of being remote yet connected.

♣ ♣

Making calls was not the only thing I wanted to do that night. No, I wanted to hear the sound I had been causing to occur out here every day and night for months, from hundreds of miles away. I wanted to hear the phone in the Mojave Phone Booth ring.

I dialed the number of my friend Audra's pager (remember pagers?) and used the Booths phone keypad to tap the Booth's number. As I waited for Audra to return my call, I explained to Cardyhouse why Audra was the perfect person for this call because of how we had met. I first heard Audra's voice on an evening a couple of years before when I burst through the front door to answer my ringing phone after dragging home a massive polystyrene Wagner wall hanging I'd cadged from a record store. I'd barely said my "Hello?" when a woman's voice said, "Oh, sorry - I've got the wrong number."

Having gone to the trouble of rushing to answer the phone, I suppose I felt I was being short-changed, so before she could hang up, I challenged her.

"How do you know this is a wrong number?"

"Because I'm trying to call my answering machine at home," she said.

Faulty logic, it seemed to me. "Well, how do you know I'm *not burglarizing your home?*

She had to admit I had a point, so she asked me to look around and describe what I saw. I was bluffing along pretty well with my description until she noticed the Wagner music I had switched on in the background while talking to her. I claimed I was playing a CD from her collection, which sank me because - hard as this is to comprehend - Audra had no Wagner in her home.

Regardless of this grievous personal deficiency and despite her being at a loud party that forced her to duck into a closet with the telephone, we had a long and enjoyable conversation. She may have inexplicably preferred Puccini to Wagner, but Wrong Number Audra and I became great pals anyhow.

Our friendship's origin story mirrored elements of the tensions I enjoyed about the Mojave Phone Booth Project: specific phone numbers vs. randomness, strangers vs. communication, hermetism vs. sociability, anonymity vs. familiarity. If Audra answered my page, she would become Right Number Audra, connecting to a Phone Booth in the remote Mojave Desert for a second improbable connection.

A few very long minutes passed in the warm, quiet desert night. Then:

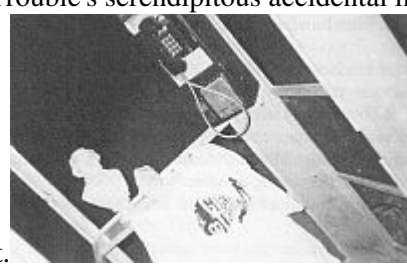
Prrrrrrrrrrrrrg

I don't know what I'd expected it to sound like, but the ringing of the Booth's perfectly ordinary telephone bell sounded shockingly extraordinary. I let it ring a few extra times before picking up the receiver to hear Audra's warm and familiar voice in a warm and unfamiliar place. It was about the only telephonic connection that could have rivaled our first one for unusualness.

At rare times, the conviction settles in that one is precisely where one ought to be. This desert spot had heard long ages' worth of mooing and yipping and braying, but for the past few months, I had been causing it to hear the ringing of a telephone. That night, I was finally able to hear its ringing myself. I felt, in a way, as if I were experiencing a compact, audible timeline of the history of the West. The effect of a payphone's ring, emanating from a telephone booth planted alone out there among the Joshua trees and geologic formations, completely surrounded by electrical storms, made concrete the ideas and confirmed the impulses that had drawn me to the idea of a desert phone booth in the first place.

That morning I had awakened in the Sonoran Desert in the same bed in which I had slept for years. By the end of that same day I was hundreds of miles away, standing in a cinder field in a completely different desert, the Mojave, inside a secluded phone booth, hearing the friendly voice of a good pal. And I thought, *It's amazing where the day can take you if you don't mind the possibility of appearing ridiculous.*

I was so overwhelmed by the whole experience that I failed to properly indulge my usual documentarian impulses. I took fewer photos than I would have if I'd been in complete possession of myself, and certainly far fewer than the occasion warranted.

For the first photo, I draped an official Girl Trouble T-shirt in the Booth next to "Wagner, in honor of Girl Trouble's serendipitous accidental initiation of the Mojave Phone Booth Project.  I posted the photo to Deuce of Clubs as soon as I returned to Arizona, making for a concatenation of multiple levels of thematic appropriateness: a photo on the DIY Internet of a DIY band's DIY T-shirt posing at the Mojave Phone Booth I'd read about in the band's DIY zine.

I took a couple of photos of a rusted stop sign maybe twenty feet from the Booth that was nearly as OOP an Art as the Booth itself and just as riddled with bullet holes. Loren had mentioned the sign, which stood beside a cattle guard on a dirt road that led (I supposed) to Lorene's cinder mine.

I found it difficult to imagine what need there could be for a stop sign way out there. I assumed it was probably just a method of assigning blame in the wildly improbable case of a collision. I wondered whether the sign had been there as long as the Booth, and whether exactly such a wildly improbable

crash or near-miss had occasioned its installation.[6]

The Booth's general appearance as a more or less neglected distant relative of the phone company made me wonder how often Pacific Bell sent someone out to collect the presumably few coins that miners, or ranchers, or passing dune buggy drivers might occasionally drop into the phone's collection box.

Noticing a couple of cinder blocks bolstering the Booth, I remembered Lorene telling me about cinder blocks, and thought it would be something if the cinder in these blocks had come from the mine just up the road. Whoever put cinder blocks beside this Booth in the Mojave Desert could never have guessed that because of those seemingly randomly placed cinder blocks, other cinder blocks would one day appear as props in a movie about the Mojave Phone Booth, carefully placed next to a prop phone booth.

I took a couple of photos of the Professor talking on the phone.[7] Then it was my turn to be in a photo. By International Treaty as well as Wagnerian decree, I am universally excused from photos, but when my friend Ponyboy Girlie Toolshed (whom you'll meet in the next chapter) heard of my plan to visit the Mojave Phone Booth, she made a request: "If I send you a blow-up pool, will you fill it up with water and make your next phone call to the Mojave Phone Booth from it?" I agreed, and she sent a small inflatable wading pool covered by a design consisting of the repeating words THANK YOU (which Ponyboy recontexrualized as a condom from the pocket of a grateful giant).

Somehow, though, I had misread Ponyboy's request. I thought she had asked me to stand in the pool while calling *from* the Booth. Accordingly, I stood in the inflatable pool (without water - we weren't carrying enough to waste) inside the Phone Booth while the Professor took a snapshot of me wearing sunbathing eye protectors and a swimming cap on which Ponyboy had written on one side MOJAVE TRANSMITTER CAP and on the other MOJAVE RECEIVER CAP. Ponyboy was happy with the outcome. "It made its own story, that little pool," Ponyboy observed, and so it had.

I also found and reunited a widely strewn pair of old, weathered sneakers that had somehow meandered away from one another. In 1922, Edna Brush Perkins wrote of her first visit to the desert, "We now know what becomes of all the old shoes in the world; they are spirited away to the desert." It sure can seem that way. One of the shoes disappeared sometime after this visit, but I saw the other one at the Booth on subsequent visits for a couple of years until someone evidently made a souvenir of it.

I decided against driving around to look for Lorene's mine because during my one brief conversation with her I hadn't been able to tell for sure whether she found my call amusing, annoying, or something in between. Wandering uninvited and unexpected up to the home of a dweller in quiet country like this can be a good way to look for trouble and maybe find it.

Given that we were heading for Burning Man, we were carrying more than sufficient camping equipment, but it wasn't the lightning that prevented

us from sleeping beside the Booth that night. True, that my home had been struck by lightning the day before felt like a cosmic benediction upon this Booth enterprise and gave me confidence that this trip would be free of bolts from above, but sill it appeared likely that at least one of the encircling storms was bound to come through, so I thought it best to leave to escape the possibility of getting temporarily marooned by a flash flood or stuck in a wash on the way out. Also, we'd need a motel if we were going to get one final decent night's sleep and a shower before our destination desert: Nevada's Black Rock Desert and the sleepless, showerless land of Burning Man.[8]

Before we left the Booth, I wrote a graffito directly above the telephone, directing any curious desert rats to DeuceOfClubs.com. Oddly enough, mine wasn't the first URL in the Booth. We were surprised to find the URL *wps.com* already scribbled inside. After the trip we found out *wps* stood for World Power Systems and that the owner of World Power Systems would tum out to be, as someone gushed to the Professor, "To Jenning! *THE* Tom Jennings! Tom 'FidoNet'Jennings! That is cool. That is very cool.[9]

Included in my graffito was a brief and half-hearted apology for my graffito, in which I rationalized that I had at least broken with the evident tradition of shooting at the poor Booth. Country Mouse leaves bullet holes, City Mouse leaves graffiti, I guess. The substance of my message, aimed at future stumblers upon the Booth, consisted of my name and the message I had decided on at the outset of the Project: **IF YOU HEAR THIS PHONE RINGING, PICK IT UP: IT'S ME.**

As I drove away, I promised myself I would return, like MacArthur, or Schwarzenegger, or anybody else who didn't know when to quit. There was still so much to know, and see, and do, regarding the Mojave Phone Booth. I still wanted to see how this old communications station looked in the light of day. Or maybe from a helicopter. Or surrounded by dozens of people. Or in a blizzard. Or on television. Within a very short time, I would see all of that and much more.

Other than when Audra called it, the Booth's phone had been silent. I would have called anybody a liar that night who told me it wouldn't be but a year or so before the Mojave Phone Booth would ring without cease with calls coming from around the globe.

Burning Man was a blast as always, but even in a desert wonderland filled with fire and explosions and naked people on unicycles, my mind kept going back to that Phone Booth in the Mojave.

Upon my return to Arizona, I found my email inbox packed with responses to the new Mojave Phone Booth website, including one from the first person to contact me after seeing the message I'd written inside the Booth.

From: Norm B.
About 2 weeks ago myself and a friend from work took a vacation together to the Mojave desert. I own a 4 wheel drive and we drove all around the Mojave National Preserve. I came across this phone booth and was amazed that it would be in the middle of nowhere. I saw your website written there and when I got home I looked it up. Maybe you do have too much time on your hands but it is an interesting story.

I was glad to know my URL was still legible. I emailed Tom Jennings ("*THE* Tom Jennings!") of wps. com, who enjoyed the Mojave Phone Booth website and the knowledge that his URL was still legible.

On October 27, 1997 came the second graffito-generated email, this one from a man who'd stumbled across the Booth while out hunting with his two sons. In the next few years I would receive loads of emails regarding the Booth. Many came from people who were baffled by the whole concept and thought I must be some kind of loon to be so interested in a telephone booth. Some were vaguely complimentary. A few were intensely interested. But at least people were reading the story. A Memphis BBS, for example, reviewed the site in brief: "Did you remember to call the Mojave Desert today? Boy finds phone, boy loves phone, boy meets phone. Boy has way too much time on his hands."

I would hear many more times from people who wrote to tell me I had too much time on my hands. On a happier note, I heard from Nick von Robison himself, the man who had set all of this nonsense in motion with his letter to *Wig Out!* although he too made a similar observation.

Date: Sat, 29 Nov 1997
You've got to get a life! <g> I didn't realize that my letter to *"Wig Out"* would spur anyone on to such an adventure. Now, if only that dedication and energy could be channeled into something a bit less, uh, pointless. watch out world. <g> Anyway, it's a pretty cool booth, as you know, and I'm glad you found it.

I'd wanted to contact Nick previously and hadn't been able to find an address. As I'd hoped, Bon von Wheelie had passed word about my Booth project to Nick.

Yep, GT clued me in months ago but I either lost the URL or forgot about it - whatever - until recently when Bon asked me to put a link to (the Booth site) on their site. It'll be fun to see where you go with this down the road.

Nick, of course, had no idea just how far down the road. I tend to go with things. But this time, neither did I. How was I to know that Pandora's box could appear in the form of a Phone Booth?

An odd and unfathomable trajectory was developing that would not fully manifest itself until the very end. It would tum out that Nick was withholding a very important piece of information about the Booth, something he could not bring himself to tell me. Had he been able to foresee the future, I am certain he would have revealed it in his first email to me. As it happened, I wouldn't discover his secret until after the fame of the Booth had circled the earth a thousand times over, shortly before both Nick and the Booth would

disappear forever.

NOTES

1 An anecdote in our defense: A year after our visit, artist Laura Molina, a friend I would later meet by way of the Mojave Phone Booth website, appeared on the game show *Win Ben Stein's Money*. One of the final round questions was, "What weather condition is denoted by the asterisk symbol?" Laura did no know. Ben Stein did not know. Evidently, we are a nation of button-icon-illiterate, stylized-snowflake-unrecognizing cave dwellers.

2 Manuscript correction by the Professor: "Six-two, but that's okay, leave it four."

3 Cardyhouse says, "You know, I probably still have some residual atoms from that burrito in me somewhere. Hello atoms."

4 **More on the Professor**

You 'll be saying: Yessir, the band is grand
He's the best Professor in all the land
- Irving Berlin, "Everybody Step"

Certain of the narrative and comic demands of this book require that I tax the Professor about various things. Don't worry. He's used to it (In fact, I entitled this footnote "More on the Professor" so that he'll read it and say, "Did you just call me a moron?!") I've often told him he sure has a lot of mean friends for a guy whose mean friends call him a "delicate flower."

I mentioned before that our Professor can tend a little to the negative side of things. Accordingly there might be a little Charlie Brown in his portrayal in this book. (Make no mistake, I love Charlie Brown.) I sometimes tell him he could find a downside to a million dollars, tax-free. But Cardyhouse also has Charlie Brown's zest for life. And let there be no misapprehension: the Professor's an experienced road-ripper. In fact, here's a brief road trip anecdote straight from Cardyhouse himself:

"In high school," he recalls, "one of my friends was pissed at this gal. But she lived in Tennessee. And we're just sitting on the porch, talking about it We'd just gone to Dairy Queen, purchased these milkshakes, came back, we're sitting on the porch, and he says, 'I want to drive to Tennessee and just pour these milkshakes on her porch' I was like, 'LETS GO!"

So what did they do? Believe it or not, next thing you know, they ... remained seated right where they were and quickly sipped their milkshakes.

"Yeah, I know," Cardyhouse says. "I'm just saying I was fully *prepared*, I was *committed*, at that point. There have been several trips like that, but none that would have been that great, that grand of a gesture."

... until The Great and Grand and Glorious Mojave Phone Booth Quest of Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Seven, I'm sure the Professor meant to add.

And I have to take issue with him on another point. I say it's a far grander gesture for someone living in the Bay Area, whose destination is Nevada's Black Rock Desert, who could therefore have simply driven over the mountains straight to Burning Man, to instead fly from Oakland to Phoenix, ride along in a van from Phoenix into he Mojave Desert to look for a possibly mythical Phone Booth, and then head north to the Black Rock Desert, all with a cranky S.O.B. like me as a road trip partner.

The Professor's grand gesture is even more grand when you consider that he didn't even really get the whole Booth thing," a he explained in passing during a 2006 radio interview on another subject.

"When I first went - I went with him the first time he went to the Phone Booth - I ... really didn't get it. A lot of us have some really interesting and hard-to-understand hobbies. You try to explain this to people, even someone like me - I have my own strange little hobbies - and he's trying to explain this to me and I'm like, 'Yeah, whatever. fun little road trip, let's do it' But after a while, it was like, 'Okay, I get the magic. I get it' I came around."

One thing that confused the Professor about the Mojave Phone Booth Project was its scope. Even a couple of years after our first Booth trip, when the worldwide Booth media blitz was raging, Professor Cardyhouse railed against what be regarded as a bizarre assumption by a reporter who wrote that I had been calling the Booth "every day for two years":

The Professor: "Every day for two years" - man, this keeps getting longer. Soon it'll be "every day for a century."

Me: What do you mean?

The Professor [*quoting the article*]: "It happened only once, he said, about three weeks after he started ringing be phone" - yeah, and after you found out that maybe she'd be out there once a month tops, you just kept on calling. Sheesh.

Me: I don't get what you're saying.

The Professor [*exasperated*]: *First* he article says you've been calling every day for two years. *Then* it says you finally go an answer after three weeks. You obviously got the skinny on the place after talking to the woman, yet for some reason you would call every day after that? This journalist really isn't thinking.

Me: No, no, no - I still *do* call every day, goofy.

Professor [*after a long, long pause*]: Man. That's wacky. Maybe I better no talk to you anymore.

I explained to Cardyhouse that it was only ever nominally the aim of the Mojave Phone Booth Project to see whether I would ever reach someone and see how long it took, if it did happen. I had expected from the outset that I would probably never reach anybody. I believed that this project would last throughout my lifetime. Even after talking to Lorene, I kept calling every day, primarily just to make a desert phone ring.

"I was a bit slow on the uptake on that one," the Professor now says. "I

think I just didn't understand that you would continue calling a booth, this booth, knowing that there wasn't a finish line! I think I actually saw the sticky note on your bathroom mirror. I remember you were explaining it, and I thought the goal - I thought the thing you were trying to do - was you were trying to get ahold of someone. Like, that was it. Boom. I got ahold of someone. now I can talk to them about, you know, let me know what's out there, and how do I get there. So when you told me that it was just the act of calling the phone booth, I ... I ... I really couldn't relate to that."

But the Professor would get there, eventually, "Understanding the Booth itself, and comprehending its greatness." Cardyhouse now says, "that didn't happen until, I think, the second trip. It wasn't the first trip. Because the first trip was at night and we didn't see anything." Mm·hnnm. Say, do you suppose he might have enjoyed it more if he'd seen it while the sun was still up? That was my fault. I knew you were gonna bring that up at some point." Damn straight, Charlie Brown.

Had I known the Tennessee milkshake story the day of the "navigational whoops. "*oh*, the grief I'd have been pouring upon poor Cardyhouse. What I'll say today is that had the Professor and his friends set out for Tennessee with the Professor navigating I'll bet they'd have ended up dumping their milkshakes on the porch of some completely unrelated, innocent Kentuckian.

5 Maybe it would have been fitting for Cardyhouse to have poured a milkshake into that mailbox.

6 Maybe it did; Charlie Wilcox would later tell me that cinder miners used to keep the dirt road well packed and graded, and trucks loaded down with cinders would sometimes zoom through there at 60 miles per hour.

7 Later, some Internet jackass would copy that photo from my website, digitally replace the Professor's face with his own and make his own Mojave Phone Booth website - one of many, many Booth copycat websites that would soon pop up like mushrooms. The site thief even stoic emails posted to my site from Booth fans to me. The Professor was still recognizable in the altered photo, though. because, as he recalls, "I was wearing my favorite shorts in the entire world, which are now somewhere in a landfill." (As much as I dislike agreeing with a Border Patrol guard, I can't think of a better place than a landfill for those flowered shorts.)

8 As it turned out, we'd have been better off sleeping on the ground next to the Booth. Instead, we spent the night in Baker, about 25 mils west of the Cima exit, in a rundown motel that as of his writing remains my fourth-worst motel experience ever. At the time, though, it was the wort. Happily, nothing is left of Arne's Royal Hawaiian Motel but an abandoned shell.

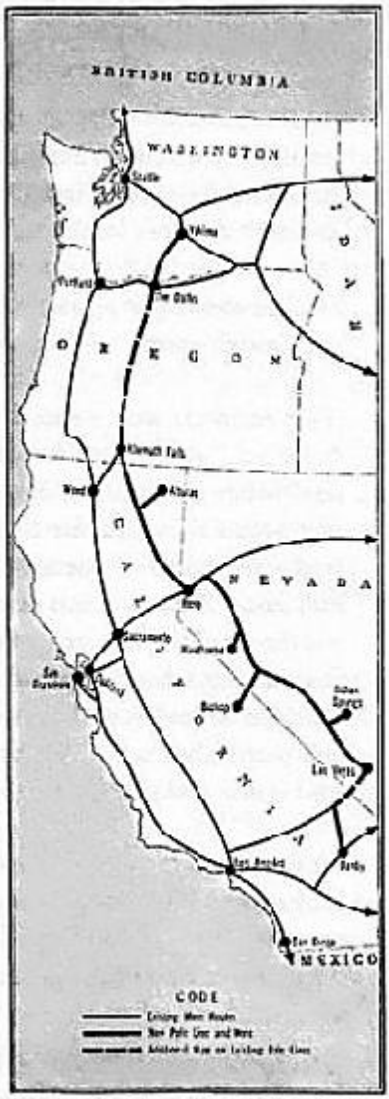
9 Not only did Tom Jenning invent he FidoNet BBS network in 1984, but he also did engineering for Bose, worked on the BIOS hat

eventually became he Phoenix BIOS, and - at some point - visited the Mojave Phone Booth.

BOOTHOGRAPHY I

A PHONE AMONG THE CINDER CONES

The telephone is something that is needed
-Dean Martin, explaining why he
became a paid spokesman for AT&T



RUNNING EAST of the coastal mountains, the DBR is linked with other important telephone lines

When I first looked for Cima Dome I failed to spot it because I focused on too small a scale. Although it's almost fifteen hundred feet tall, it covers 75 square miles, with a slope so gradual that it doesn't stand out from the landscape the way I'm used to mountains doing.

What is now a surface land form was once deep underground. Many millions of years ago, a volcano stood where Cima Dome is today. Over the ages the volcano completely eroded away, exposing a crystalline granite batholith composed of plutons formed when magma cooled and hardened beneath the volcano during the Mesozoic Era. After being forced to the surface by tectonic action, the batholith eventually weathered over further

millions of years into the dome-shaped landform we see today (once we know what we're looking for, that is).

In the area of the Mojave Phone Booth itself is the Cima Volcanic Field, with basalt lava flow formations and over fifty volcanic vents. Some of these eruptions happened as long ago as seven million years, but there were also eruptions here only thousands of years ago - possibly as recently as only a thousand years ago. Left behind by this activity were dozens of cinder cones, some as tall as five hundred feet, which is how there happened to be cinder mining operations here in the 1940s, when, as a side effect of a world at war, a government-sponsored telephone crew rolled through the area.

The United States in 1942 was in the grip of war fever, among whose myriad effects was the construction of an almost 900-mile-long telephone line *in less than a single year* that would eventually make possible the Mojave Phone Booth.

The Telephone Road. Built by telephone men in order to build the pole line, it stretches north and south as far as the eye can see

One of the most outstanding construction projects in Bell System history was completed in the Far West, in 1942, when a new 892-mile long distance pole line, wire stringing on a total of 1,317 miles of line, and the necessary repeater stations and equipment were engineered and completed in one fourth the time which would ordinarily be required. Stretching from central Washington to southern California, through mountains and desert which never before had echoed to the clatter of a construction outfit [...] "DBR" is the name by which this unusual line is known - the initials being associated, by those who were in on the job, with the phrase *Damned Big Rush*. Other names often used during construction days were *North-South Toll Lead* and the *Jackrabbit*, the latter for the speed with which it lit out across the country.

The line was built to provide a complete alternative telephone route paralleling the Coast east of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges. Thus protected by mountain ramparts, the wires are relatively safe from enemy attack.[1]

[T]he engineers were sometimes in sight of the motorized telephone construction outfits which were following than. So close, in fact, that one chain man complained that "he hardly had time to get his hand out of the way" before a mechanical digger would be there to put a hole in. There was much good-natured banter between surveyors and construction men on this score; the latter claiming that the stakes were driven wherever there was sand - regardless of whether there was solid rock six inches under the surface or the stakes were propped up with stones if the sand was not deep enough! This was desert humor, for which there was daily need.[2] The road and the

telephone line are inseparable. They stretch through the forests and over the desert, as far as eye can see. Occasionally, where a particularly steep hill blocks the way, the poles march on over the crest while the road skirts the slope, in respect to the force of gravity and the limitations of mechanized equipment, however powerful. As time passes, the road will again be covered by sagebrush, and there may come a day when travelers will ask, "What road is that, and where does it go?" [3]

How surprised travelers would have been had they discovered that the road led to a telephone booth that looked as if it had been plopped down there for no other reason than amusement. As for me, now that I knew exactly where that road went, I knew I would be returning as soon as possible.

That turned out to be not even three months later.

NOTES

1 Richard C. Smith, "Building the West's New Telephone Route: As a Safeguard in case of Enemy Attack, an Alternative Telephone Line Was Constructed East of he Pacific Coast Ranges in Record-breaking Time," *Bell Telephone Magazine*, Winter 1944-45, p. 241.
2 Ibid, p. 243.
3 Ibid, p. 247.

SOMETHING-OR-OTHER CALLETH UNTO SOMETHING ELSE

WHIP IT! THE ART CAR JOURNEYS TO THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH AND MOST OF THE WAY BACK

The ultimate triumph is to create a magnificent disaster.
-Kit Lambert, former manager of the The Who

I pulled into my driveway after my first Mojave Phone Booth adventure feeling as if I had just taken a spin on the world's greatest thrill ride. I wanted to run right back to the end of the line to ride again, but there was of course no line forming to visit the Booth, any more than there was to call its number. I was at this point the only Booth enthusiast.

I was curious to find out whether the Booth might interest others as much as it did me. As if privy to my thoughts, a couple of friends I'd recently met emailed to invite me on a November road trip they were thinking of taking. Architectural historian and preservationist Daniel Paul and sender of kiddie wading pools Ponyboy GirlieToolshed wanted to visit a desert art project called Salvation Mountain to help is creator launch a massive hot air balloon, then drive to Victorville to tour the Roy Rogers Museum, then head to Helendale to visit a burlesque museum called Exotic World. My friends' itinerary did not extend as far as a Phone Booth halfway between Helendale and Las Vegas.

Not as far as *they* knew, anyway. What I noticed was that all of their chosen stops were in Southern California, making them all, according to my reading of the atlas, Booth-adjacent.

My preliminary probing, subtle as a stage whisper I'm sure, suggested that my friends weren't overtly opposed to adjunct wandering. From my perspective, the burlesque museum sounded like a perfect staging area for mounting a second expedition to the Booth. Accordingly, delicate instigation

was called for.

I sent a recruitment email to other friends and potentially interested parties, casually slipping the Mojave Phone Booth into Ponyboy's and Daniel's itinerary while still making it appear as if that pan might be optional.

For me, returning to the Booth was the opposite of optional. Whatever my friends decided to do, there was no question that after Exotic World I would take the shortest possible route from there to the Booth. I was determined to see it in the sunlight. I didn't know whether I'd be able to convince Ponyboy and Daniel into coming with me but I assumed a few other friends would join the expedition without even necessarily having to be tricked. After all, by now they'd all heard, or read on DeuceOfClubs.com, the "Wow!"-filled tale of my first visit to the Mojave Phone Booth. On my return visit I expected to bring a group, or an entourage, or a crew of some size, anyway.

Musician-prankster Bill Drummond, who once built a fire with a million pounds in cash, posed the question, "Is driving alone with a spurious destination better than going to the Tate Modern?" I say yes. I've done a whole lot of road tripping alone, but there's also a whole lot to be said on behalf of companionable road tripping. As Mark Twain said, "There ain't no surer way to find out whether you like people or hate them than to travel with them."

I remained fully in agreement with Mr. Twain on that even though no one signed on for the trip but Ponyboy, Daniel, and I, and only one of us was sure we would be visiting a remote desert Phone Booth.

While two people didn't exactly amount to the size of crew I'd envisioned, events during the trip would reveal my two amigos as all the crew a person could need. But all I was thinking regarding numbers when I set out for Salvation Mountain was that if Daniel and Ponyboy were to agree to extend their trip as far as the Mojave Phone Booth, that'd be twice as many friends as came with me to see the Booth on my first visit. Folks, the technical term for that is *exponential growth*. I did not know that my second Booth visit would be my final visit before the Booth's meager renown experienced exponential growth of its own.

There's an old joke in which a Texan boasts, "At my ranch, I can get in my car, drive all day, and never come to the property line" and an Arizonan responds, "I know just what you mean. I used to have a car like that." Well, this Arizonan did used to have a car like that and in order to make my second trip to the Booth more of a challenge (I guess? I mean, in hindsight, there had to be some reason), I decided to try to drive it throughout our winding journey through Southern California and finally, accompanied or alone, through the gauntlet of treacherous driving conditions that constituted the road to the Booth. In so doing, I would be rolling yet another sphere of DIY into the

Mojave Phone Booth Project: art cars.

Whip It! was the name I gave my poor old breakdown-prone 1962 Chevrolet Biscayne after I converted it into an an car by wallpapering it with 120 copies of a single record album cover from 1965, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass's *Whipped Cream Other Delights*. I also custom-installed the swankiest vinyl roof you ever saw. Not a factory vinyl roof - that would have required actual skills - but rather a decorative roof covering comprised entirely of vinyl *Whipped Cream Other Delights* LP records affixed with heaping helpings of love (actually silicone, love not always being quite as strong a bonding agent as people claim).

Love was something my mechanic did not have for the idea of my trying to drive this mechanically challenged sedan from Arizona to the Gulf of Mexico. Therefore, just as a rented Dodge Caravan had taken the Professor and me to the Booth, a Dodge Caravan owned by my friend Burford would pull *Whip It!* to Houston. We joined a Texas-bound caravan of an cars that had formed in the Bay Area and accumulated an cars along the way, eventually becoming eight or nine cars strong. Several people traveling with the caravan who had not brought an cars of their own were riding along as passengers and would switch around among the various cars, which is how Daniel and Ponyboy became integral parts of the *Whip It!* story and thereby also of the Mojave Phone Booth saga.

Ponyboy GirlieToolshed (NYSE:PBGT) is a genial, lightly freckled woman whom one somehow instantly senses to be every bit as kind, good-humored, and reliable as in our story she proves herself to be. I had always assumed that the *Ponyboy* part of her name came from the old song, you know, "Ponyboy, Ponyboy / Won't you be my ponyboy?" Not until I interviewed her for this book did I learn that in some manner perhaps similar to Abe Lincoln's bizarre claim that the union of the states was older than the states that created the union, Ponyboy GirlieToolshed's name was derived from something that had not yet come into existence, namely, a horse-themed art car she would eventually build onto a 1990 Ford Escort. My favorite features were the topographic maps painted on its doors and the facsimile horse head mounted on the forward section of the roof that had a tube feeding down to the front seat so the driver or passenger could blow cigarette smoke out of the horse's nostrils. "The Ponyboy part came from my obsession with cowgirls and cool western wear" she says, while the GirlieToolshed part "had more to do with the inside of the car, which was just about the girlie toolshed - living out of the car, having all your cool shit in your car. Safety pins, tools, whatever." But why not Pony*girl*? "I just liked Ponyboy better. And originally that Ford Escort was the Pony model and the previous owner was a really good friend of mine and they used to call it the Ponyboy. So I just kind of stuck with Ponyboy."

When I mention Ponyboy to someone who doesn't know her and say *she*, it throws them. "I was too stupid to realize that Ponyboy has some kind of

weird sexual thing attached to it." (You might want to avoid doing a web search on that term.) Maybe Ponyboy would have been better off with the name as garbled by Professor Cardyhouse in his trip notes: "Pony Boy and Girlie Fencepost."

One of Ponyboy's most notable features, besides sharing a name with a sex appliance, is a Pippi Longstocking tattoo on her leg. Ponyboy told me, "She's, like, my heroine," which seems appropriate for something shot under the skin with a needle. The tattoo bears either some or no relation at all to a bizarre leg ailment she suffered on the very same leg (unless it was the other one) after some bicyclist became enraged after being frightened by Ponyboy's large, gentle dog, Mahler (please pardon this paragraph containing two puns). The brave bicyclist chucked his bicycle at Ponyboy, gashing her leg. A mysterious infection took hold in the wound and set about devouring a widening circle of leg meat before abating and leaving her with a scar and some fascinating photos she took to document the pathology of some sort of necrosis or something but what I'm saying is that it's hard not to admire someone who will cheerfully show you photodocumentation depicting progressive stages of flesh-eating gruesomeness.

I didn't at first know quite what to make of the other accidental caravanner, Daniel of Anaheim. (Says Ponyboy, Go figure. ") Daniel seemed to have an awful lot of baggage. And I don't mean emotional baggage. "I overpacked," Daniel admits. "For a week-long trip I brought, like, five bags." At first Daniel struck me as oddly earnest, in that California sort of way that doesn't need to be explained to non-Californians. Turns out, I just didn't recognize Daniel's unique style of solid genuineness. In a certain way he's kind of like Beaver Cleaver, if the Beav had gone on to earn advanced university degrees. In an email just before our trip, Ponyboy referred to Daniel as "His Mighty Folkness" because he is in fact an architectural historian and preservationist with an expert knowledge of several subject areas, including what people sometimes call *folk art* or *naïve art*.

I thought he seemed a little naïve himself but that was just my initial failure to understand his lack of guile. Though he could, Daniel doesn't carry himself with the elevated air of an expert. The accuracy of my initial impression of Daniel would have been greatly increased had I known he was the de facto curator of Bottle Village, an art-car-like DIY assemblage of structures in Simi Valley, California built from bottles and other debris collected from the city dump by Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey for the purpose of housing her enormous collection of pencils.

My unwarranted rush to judgment regarding Daniel was rolled back in a single moment as our caravan rolled through Texas. We had no cell phones, so each car had a citizens band radio so we could keep the caravan together in traffic. To be honest, we mostly used the CBs to crack jokes to each other and listen in on the fun being had at our expense by passing truckers. As we crossed a seemingly endless stretch of rolling hills covered with golden grass,

Daniel's smooth, art-museum-guide-quality voice came over the radios and intoned, "We are now passing through a very nice Edward Hopper painting."

Daniel turned out to be both insightful and hilarious. In response to a Leon Russell song playing on the radio, Daniel commented, "This is music to look at yourself naked in the mirror by." Another time he said, "I like the bridges in Phoenix. They have, like, colors in them." When I cracked wise about the okra Phoenix contractors must be mixing into the cement, Daniel's instant response was, "Oh! They're Cajun bridges. *Soul* bridges." (If only it weren't too late for Isaac Hayes to record an album called *Soul Bridges*!)

A few minutes before the art car parade began, I found an oddly farseeing fortune cookie fortune lying on a Houston street. It said, "Good company in a journey makes the way seem shorter." I agree. except instead of *shorter* I would substitute *pleasurably longer*. The journey to Houston Art Car Weekend 1997 truly was as much fun as the weekend itself and believe me, that weekend was *fun.* One of the best things about the journey was getting to know Ponyboy and Daniel. It was clear that one trip with Ponyboy and Daniel was not going to be enough. Even during the trip we were having so much fun we were already talking about a second trip.

This Way to the Gateway, Ladies and Gentlemen!

I get my kids any way I can
'cos I'm the phone booth man

- Tuff Darts, "Phone Booth Man (P.BM.)"

On a cool November day I drove to meet Ponyboy and Daniel in a sparsely populated desert spot near the Salton Sea called Slab City. Named for its many concrete slabs and entire lack of a city, Slab City is a semi-permanent, vaguely anarchistic desert hideout east of the Anza-Borrego Desert, some fifty miles north of the Mexican border. Siting at the edge of the Chocolate Mountains, the area's relative remoteness from metastasizing California cities would likely have preserved its desert beauty for generations, had not that same remoteness prompted the U.S. military to seize much of it for the site of the not-at-all-delicious Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range.

Slab City's rotating cast of desert rats, bikers, and retirees might seem to be on the whole a less than religious bunch yet their *de facto* emblem is Salvation Mountain, which sits at the entrance to the slabs. Anyone calling Salvation Mountain the *Gateway to Slab City* would have to have called Vermont-born Leonard Knight its gatekeeper. The late Mr. Knight, who died in 2014, wandered into the California desert in he 1980s. He came to the area for the same basic reason as the rest of the Slab Citizens. "I have no rules whatsoever," Knight once told me, "and they're lettin' me do my thing. Beautiful! Freedom!" Which wastrue, I suppose, if one doesn't count

California bureaucrats constantly threatening legal action and the destruction of Knight's life's work. He lived for decades in a truck decorated with the same sorts of stylized flowers and religious slogans with which he decorated the 50-foot-tall berm he christened a "mountain," covering it with untold thousands of gallons of paint, mud, and straw that he fashioned into colorful Bible slogans and nature scenes. Before creating his mountain artwork, Knight had sewn a gigantic hot air balloon with a religious message on it. The balloon soon began to rot under the desert sun. He said he was glad it did, because its disintegration opened his eyes to the greater canvas that became Salvation Mountain.

I met up with Daniel, Ponyboy and a group of art car artists, Slab City residents, and other well wishers to help Knight try to get his giant hot air Jesus balloon aloft just once before it was shipped off to the permanent collection of The American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. We all had a fine time failing to accomplish that (partly because instead of a proper burner, Knight had only an old wood-burning stove).

Ponyboy, Daniel, and I then spent the night on the shore of the Salton Sea. I told them I didn't think sleeping atop thousands of desiccated fish and bird carcasses and mounds of fish bones was such a hot idea, and that the sea's renowned stink would rise with the sun, but Ponyboy and Daniel spread their sleeping bags right on top of the carnage. The only other available resting place wasn't a whole lot better, being *Whip It!'s* wide front bench seat, from which I had only recently removed a dung-filled pack rat nest.

After a long day's drive and attempted balloon inflation, I slept well until I was roused early in the morning by the sound of voices. As predicted, Ponyboy and Daniel had been awakened at sunrise by the fragrance of Salton Sea perfume, a.k.a. the odor of hordes of bacteria breaking down the rotting flesh of fish and fowl. Events later in the day would prove that the stink had done us a favor by getting us up and going shortly after sunrise. Salton Sea stink, I owe you a beer.

We then headed northward alongside the sea. We had wanted to visit Santa's Village, an attraction up at Lake Arrowhead, but it had closed its doors two months earlier. (Believe it or not, it turns out there is no Santa Claus. Sure would've been nice if someone had told us that beforehand.)

There's definitely a real Roy Rogers, or was in 1997, so we drove to Victorville to try and see him. We'd heard he did hang out in his museum occasionally, but the closest we got to Roy Rogers or Dale Evans were encounters with his dead horse, dead dog, and live grandson, who rang up the few egregiously overpriced Roy Rogers doodads I bought.

After failing to meet Roy Rogers, we succeeded in meeting someone far more interesting. Dixie Evans ran a mind-blowing burlesque museum called Exotic World. She showed us her collection of showgirl treasures, including Sally Rand's fans and a dress of Gypsy Rose Lee's. In her performing days, Dixie had been known as "The Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque." As she

explained in her Marilyn Monroe voice: "If you couldn't see the real Marilyn, you could come to the theater and see me. I might've shown you a little more than Marilyn" - here she lifted a hand to her mouth in mock coyness - "in fact, I *know* I did!" In her own voice she added, "And I got arrested a couple times, too - *at election time!*" Dixie's museum was a blast, and she sold her T-shirts and doodads at far more reasonable prices than Roy Rogers did, too.

After a fabulous tour of the museum (including old-timey stag films!) we stood around chatting outside. Dixie, who died in 2013, was someone that just about anyone would love to chat with. My concern, however, was to make sure Daniel and Ponyboy weren't regarding Exotic World as the terminus of our road trip. If we were going to have any chance of getting to the Booth in the daylight, we'd have to leave within minutes. Trouble was, Daniel had gotten deep in conversation with Dixie regarding the preservation of Exotic World beyond Dixie's lifetime. A worthy subject and one concerning which Daniel has expertise and experience. Despite my intellectual sympathy, my body language tried as hard as it could to say, *Might it be possible for this lengthy discussion to take place at another time perhaps? Possibly? Maybe?*

My non-verbal hints had no more effect on Daniel than my out-loud hints had on the burrito-munching Professor. Even if I'd been willing to break into the conversation, I wouldn't have known what to say, because our next move hadn't been agreed to, so I couldn't whisper to Daniel, "Excuse me, but remember we have a ways to go tonight." Plus, if I emphasized the distance, the Booth might sound too far away. And it was pretty far, to be honest. (I can afford to be honest, decades after the fact) It's 80 miles just to get from Helendale to Baker, then you've got another 25 or 30 miles to the Cima exit, and then 12-1/2 slow dirt road miles farther to reach the Booth.

On top of everything else, we'd been rushing from place to place since sunrise and hadn't remembered to eat a meal. Didn't I tell you Ponyboy and Daniel are stalwart road trippers? But they would definitely want to eat something before heading into the desert. And who knew whether Daniel would be willing to drive his Honda into the desert at all, let alone late at night, and in winter, and then stay there through the cold night?

So, I waited.

Meanwhile, in a remote desert location, the sun set on a Phone Booth.

At last the conversation ended and we all said goodbye to Dixie. Ponyboy and Daniel were talking about heading back to Los Angeles because they both had jobs to go to, Daniel the following afternoon back in Anaheim and Ponyboy the morning after that, all the way up in Berkeley.

But I had to try, didn't I?

"We did not plan on going to the Phone Booth that night," Daniel recalls. "You had to kind of talk me into it a little bit. It just didn't sound real appealing to me at first. Then I just thought, well, maybe it's not that far off. So I think I just kind of trusted your judgment"

Ha! Error!

"Yeah! Error number 4.2," Daniel says, laughing. "I didn't know how far it was. But I think your argument was, we're fairly close to it now, so we might as well."

I'm amazed to this day that Daniel was willing even to entertain the possibility. Here he was, with work hanging over his head in Anaheim the following afternoon, and here we were in Helendale, already 70 or more miles outside Los Angeles, and there I was, saying, "We could be sleeping beside the Mojave Phone Booth *tonight*!"

Daniel kept asking, "Well, how far is it, exactly?" and I was trying to be as vague as possible, using as many different wordings as possible, without actually lying. *You know where Bartow is, rght?*

And Daniel says, "Oh, yeah, Barstow's right over there."

Yeah, yeah. So there's Barstow, and then, you know, there's Baker.

Daniel brightened. "Oh, it's by Baker?"

And I say, *Yeah ... sure. Sure it is*. I mean, the Phone Booth was "by" Baker, in the larger scheme of things. It was the truth, but it was not the whole truth, and certainly not nothing but the truth.

That Daniel opted to go surprised Ponyboy. "He didn't even know how far he was going!" she says. "You're like: *Allow ... me ... to ... manipulate ... you!*

All the same, I'm going to claim here and now, and only partly for comic effect, that my efforts weren't *completely* selfish. Maybe 70%, sure, okay. But I knew how powerful an experience visiting the Booth was and I really did want my new friends to have that experience. I was sure they were two people who'd appreciate it. It was just that there was no easy way to explain that. I knew that once they saw it, they would *see* it, you know? But it was hard to put that into convincing words. "Well, it's this amazing ... um ... telephone booth." Years later, Ponyboy would say, "I've found myself in that position a hundred times, trying to explain the Booth to people - how cool it was. And people just didn't get it, which makes the phenomenon phase of it even more interesting to me."

It was fully dark by the time we finally bid happy trails to Exotic World. It would be cold out on the desert. A Mojave November night is not a Mojave August night such as the Professor and I had enjoyed. What warmed me was knowing that, although I had again failed to arrive at the Booth in the daylight, if we spent the night out there, at daybreak I'd finally get to see the Mojave Phone Booth lit by the sun.

It illustrates much of what I consider good and great about Ponyboy and Daniel that after knowing me for only a brief time they would allow themselves, at the tail end of an already successful and event-filled - and exhausting - road trip, to be talked into continuing further up and further in, all just to meet up with a telephone booth. One of my personal road trip maxims is, "If you can reach it within a day, it's on the way." In that sense, the Booth was on our way. But with Ponyboy and Daniel I didn't even have to invoke that maxim.

Not being addicted to jazz, heroin, or human blood has left me unaccustomed to eating my first meal of the day at 9:00 at night, but I am aware it's not the best plan to wander into the desert on an empty stomach. We therefore stopped to eat in the final town we'd see before the Booth. Baker, California (major exports: gasoline, Greek food, horrifying lodging memories) is almost more of a rest stop than a town but it does boast a 134-foot-tall tower its Chamber of Commerce promotes as "The World's Largest Thermometer." Each twelve inches of simulated thermometer symbolizes one of the 134 degrees the mercury reached on July 10, 1913. Not in Baker, you understand, but over a hundred miles away, in Death Valley.

Some people find Baker's famous thermometer disappointing. After the first Booth trip, Cardyhouse wrote, "The World's Tallest Thermometer is the World's Biggest Letdown for me. The actual thermometer gauge is a series of two-digit displays crawling up the side of the tower. A digital, discrete thermometer, not even close to the analog, continuous type we stick in our various mouths and butts." I'm usually not a stickler for strict representationalism in art but in this case I can see where it might have been nice if a little more effort had been expended toward making a tower billed as The World's Largest Thermometer appear at least somewhat traditionally thermometer-like.

Some are even more disappointed than the Professor, expecting to see, if you can believe it, a giant, operational, mercury-filled thermometer. Yes, how did it not occur to Baker townspeople to erect a 134-foot tall tower filled with mercury right next to one of this continent's busiest freeways? For whatever reason, Baker decided against setting the stage for a spectacular future terrorist attack and instead used chase light theatrics to call attention to a blistering, baking, heat that most Chambers of Commerce would try to downplay. As the song advises, Baker chose to ac-cent-chu-ate the positive. Texas has longhorns, Nebraska's got corn, and Baker's got fuel, food, and the fiery heat of Beelzebub's own backyard Bar-B-Q.

We weren't looking for Bar-B-Q necessarily but we were looking for food. Before Baker had a giant thermometer, it was mostly known for the restaurant next to the thermometer. Bun Boy was a place for travelers to eat meals, buy Bun Boy souvenirs, and speculate on why anyone would name a restaurant Bun Boy. (It was later converted to a Big Boy - equally inscrutable, if you let yourself think about it.) The Bun Boy gift shop was closed when we got there, but I talked an employee into opening it up so I could buy various Bun Boy dinguses: keychains, buttons, whistles, T-shirts, I don't remember what all. I used to be a big dingus fan, before I discovered the power of photos, the power of not carrying things, and the power of having nearly all of my possessions carted off by thieves.

(Ponyboy's recollection of Bun Boy is that "something funny happened

there." Unless she remembers more detail before press time, I'll have to ask you to imagine a funny Bun Boy anecdote for yourself, after the fashion of Gertrude Stein's famously nebulous stage direction, *Witty remarks are made off-stage*.)

Having eaten at Bun Boy that night, I thereafter encouraged all prospective Baker visitors to buy their souvenirs at Bun Boy but their food across the street at Mad Greek Cafe. After a few nighttime giant thermometer snapshots with Wagner, we continued our trip eastward along I-15 until after 20 or so minutes we reached the Cima exit sign, now having been amended to read "GATEWAY TO THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH."

Just kidding. The Booth was not yet famous, and even after it was, there never was such a sign, to the credit of the owners of the small store housed in the former Stuckey's building, which was closed for the night. We had taken our time and enjoyed ourselves with a lot of talking and laughing at Bun Boy, so it had gotten fairly late. We did pause briefly at the junction of Cima Road and the dirt road turnoff to the Booth. For the second time I had in my headlamps the dirt road that this time I knew for sure led to the Booth. A fully unwarranted feeling of reassurance manifested itself - to me, that is. Daniel was apparently having some trepidation. "You could start any sentence about Daniel with that," Ponyboy says, and even though the Daniel I know is always game, I also know what she means. "He's always game," Ponyboy agrees, "but he always has some level of worry."

I've since slithered through double chain-link fences with Daniel. I've watched him scramble up a rickety ziggurat of crumbling wooden shipping pallets nearly as tall as Salvation Mountain, without a moment's decent forethought, whereas I stayed on the ground and took photos of him in the event they should be needed by an insurance company, personal injury lawyer, or news tabloid. Make no mistake, Daniel is familiar with foolhardy adventures.

The problem was, he was also all too familiar with *my* foolhardy adventures, as chronicled on my website in probably far too copious detail to suit the purpose at hand. My foolhardy adventures had already by that time involved many incidents of automotive mischance and here we were on a frosty cold November night in a desert renowned for its ability to devour a dozen automobiles at a single sitting and still have room for an RV dessert and between-meal motorcycles. Who could blame Daniel for wondering whether he was about to become a featured player in yet another episode of doom?

In addition, my claims of being certain of the way to the Booth might not have appeared entirely convincing. Also, the sight of the corduroy surface that formed much of the road to the Booth could have made anyone question the gumption of his transportation. It damn sure ought to have made me question mine. But it didn't, because I was this close - *this dose* - to being at the Booth again! If I wasn't going to turn back at Dixie's, or at Bun Boy, there was no

chance I'd turn tail with only 12-1/2 miles to go, even if Daniel did, despite knowing full well it would be not just foolhardy but downright moronic to drive into the Mojave Desert alone in a car that had until recently sat for years in the Sonoran Desert, unmoved and unused, except as a toilet by pack rats, and which had who knows what as-yet-undiscovered mechanical issue or issues. If *Whip It!* broke down, it wouldn't be funny (except in the retelling, provided I survived).

Rather than thinking of safe traveling (it's doubtless clear by now how little I think of safety when traveling), I was thinking that Ponyboy and Daniel, if they truly knew what it was like to experience the Mojave Phone Booth, would not want to be deprived of this opportunity. I was sure that if I didn't exert all possible encouragement now, they would "reproach me in later life for this uncalled-for lack in their education." But there was no way of getting them to know the experience than by getting them to have the experience. Just as there's no royal road to geometry, there was no gnostic road to the Booth. You had to travel there and experience it firsthand and unfiltered.

You might doubt me but in all honesty I truly was thinking that. I knew they'd kick themselves later if they turned down this chance, especially having been a mere 12-1/2 miles away. You can ask Daniel or Ponyboy today if I was right. (I have, and they say I was.) Or you could ask any of the multitudes who have since told me how much they "always meant to visit the Booth" and regret never having done it.

I therefore spoke to Daniel as many soothing words of false comfort as I could think of: *don't worry, no problem, easy peasy*, and any other words of groundless encouragement it popped into my head to recite, which is of course exactly the sort of freewheeling, irresponsible counsel one can expect from the guy whose own obscenely undependable car is likely as not to break down in the desert at any moment.

"I the flux of desert darkness"

> Ich habe dieses Auto gebraucht gekauft.
> Es kann jeden Augenblick versagen.
> (I bought this car second hand.
> It may break down at any moment. ")
>
> *- Langsheidts Korversationsbuch English-Deutsch*

After only a few minutes' pause, our two cars began the bumpy trip down Aiken Mine Road. The sun now many hours gone, there was no rush, although the coldness of the night made it unlikely we were going to stop and smell the creosote.

I had no map but wasn't worried about being able to find the Booth again. Between the first Booth trip and this one, a technological advnce had taken

place in the navigational sciences, namely, the loss of the first Booth trip's navigator, Professor Cardyhouse, who was safely hundreds of miles from this undertaking. I figured if I couldn't find my way back to the Phone Booth mapless and in the dark, well, maybe we deserved to get lost (although I might have regarded it as poor salesmanship to have shared that view with my companions).

"I remember following you and *Whip It!* down the unpaved part which I remember thinking was very, very long," Daniel says. "And it was pitch black. It was very dark and I'm on this unpaved road. It seemed like we must have been on it anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes. It just seemed like a real long time."

To me the drive through the desert to the Booth didn't feel as long as it had the first time. Subsequent trips always seem shorter than first ones (especially when no sit-down burritos are involved). Or it could be the fact that, in my excitement to see the Booth again, I was foolishly piloting *Whip It!* with that same sense of wanton "It's a rental!" invulnerability with which I had driven the rental van the first time when, cruising along in a brand-new rental van, my main concern had been to reach the Booth before nightfall. With my plan on this trip to coax an ancient sedan of already proven unreliability down a path treacherous to vehicles, my main concern should have been just reaching the Booth at all. And I probably should have given at least as much thought, if not more, to getting back out of that desert. But I also regard a certain obliviousness to established facts and obstacles as a main ingredient when one is throwing together one of the casseroles of unplanned-for situations I like to think of as *adventures*. I simply trusted that *Whip It!'s* loose assemblage of vintage moving parts would keep moving in the face of whatever foolishness I steered it toward. Consequently, over the course of the rest our trip Daniel, Ponyboy, and I enjoyed maybe a few more unplanned-for ingredients than most people care to include in their adventure casseroles.

Somewhere around midnight the Mojave Phone Booth was once again before my eyes, bathed in the glow of headlamps.

Ponyboy felt the magic. "And then you come up on this thing and it's just very *unexpected*. Phone booths were practically antiquated anyway at that point, and for it to be out *there*. To me, the Phone Booth was always about people connecting in an authentic kind of a way, without there being all of this charade around it. It was just this kind of unbelievable thing that existed anyway. You start to think about it: *How does that happen?* You know? I mean, *really. What is that?"*

Absurd, perhaps? "Yeah! It's like a *tale* someone would spin."

I parked my car to the left of the Booth and Daniel parked his to the right, near the cattle guard and the all-but-sarcastic rusted stop sign. When we got

out of our cars, we all experienced the strange elation that would become almost traditional during these Booth visits, as though emerging from a lunar capsule for a moon walk.

"I was son of marveling at how beautiful and quiet and still everything seemed and how far away we were from everything," Daniel remembers. "I saw one light off in the distance, and at night you couldn't see any of those plants or anything. It just was like being in the ocean, like if you look out at the ocean and see some horizon on the distance. It was like being on the opposite side of that horizon, as if we were standing in the middle of a flat, calm sea."

The Booth's phone was as quiet as it had been on my first visit. I was still the only person on the planet dialing the Booth's number just to make it ring. But we weren't there to receive calls. We were there to spend the night beside a Phone Booth in the desert and wake up beside it in the morning light.

The cold added to the overall lunar impression. High desert gets much colder than low desert, which can get plenty cold itself in November. Seeing one's own breath is a novelty for low desert dwellers but not something we necessarily look forward to. Not only does it give away one's position to snipers, but it also means, damn, it's *cold*. An old book about Inuit people I'd read several times came to mind. I'd always thought it was funny how often they repeated the phrase *It is cold*. Somehow it no longer seemed so funny. The three of us were now repeating it, too. I don't even know why I ever thought it was weird. During an Arizona desert summer, I don't know how many times a day people will repeat "It's hot." The temperature on my first nighttime visit to the Booth had been pleasantly warm, but on this night, yes: *cold*.

"It was *freezing*, says Ponyboy. "Daniel and I really wanted to start a fire and you were adamant that we not start a fire because it would 'draw attention to us." I don't remember saying that, but I have to admit it does sound kind of like me, not that I'm habitually wary of snipers or anything nutty like that. I just tend to be cautious of unplanned human contact in deserts. "Oh my gosh, you were like a Fire Nazi!" she says. "You were like [*yells*], *Don't do that!* Which, of course, instigated us to start the fire, anyway." I'd swear I was right next to them the whole time, yet I don't remember them building a fire. "Yeah, we did." Ponyboy laughs. "It was just a tiny little thing, but you sufficiently guilted us that we put it out. I think it was wise, actually, because you were trying not to draw attention to our presence out there." Honestly, part of my thinking was that I still hadn't talked again to Lorene and I didn't know whether visits to the Booth would be welcome or would instead annoy her or anyone else who might live out this way.

Ponyboy and I decided it would be a good idea to beautify the abused and shot-up Booth for the heart-gladdening of any future night visitors, using glow-in-the-dark paint left over from my Human Magic 8-Ball project at Burning Man. Above the Booth's phone I affixed a Girl Trouble sticker, in

honor of the band that had inadvertently started these adventures. Daniel was otherwise occupied. He says he was really impressed with the fact that there was a dial tone" but adds, "I think I was just eating snacks." Eventually, he did attach to the Booth a dead fish he'd picked up at the Salton Sea. It felt like a week or more since we'd tried to launch Leonard's balloon at Salvation Mountain. It hadn't even been 24 hours.

I took a few steps away from the Booth and gave some thought to its companion, that rusted and bullet-riddled stop sign. If the Booth was an expectancy violation or pattern interrupt, the sign could be viewed as a flat-out directive to STOP and take a moment to allow oneself to think whatever thoughts a Booth or a stop sign in a remote desert might prompt I thought about when I was in high school and my friend Gordon and I abruptly decided late one Friday night to go camping up among the pines. We arrived around l a.m. and found a nice spot right beside a creek. We stretched out in the pickup bed under the stars and fell asleep almost instantly. In the morning we were awakened by bustling sounds and opened our eyes to see the faces of children peering over the side of the truck. We sat up to find the place overrun with people and tents and fishermen and picnics. I doubted the stop sign meant that could happen here at the Booth the following morning, but there were mines in the area, so one couldn't be sure.

It was a little late to phone anyone. Neither Ponyboy nor I made any phone calls from the Booth, but someone else we know did.

"Let's see, did I call anybody that night?" Daniel thinks for a moment. "No. I don't think I did"

Oh, yes, Daniel. You did.

Daniel decided to call the number of the product information hotline printed on the can of a hazelnut coffee beverage he'd been drinking. It was a good plan because it was an 800 number and wouldn't require a calling card, plus there might be an operator standing by who would have no choice but to talk to him.

Daniel is a man with a charming but slightly puzzling phone demeanor. Whenever he left me a voice message, he always began it the same way: "Hi, it's Daniel Paul. How are you doing?" The brightness of Daniel's voice can almost cause you to respond aloud to a recording. The puzzle that is Daniel combined with a puzzling phone booth made for what ought to have been the highlight of some bored corporate customer service representative's night. Daniel might have sounded like someone who'd spent his evening using hazelnut coffee drinks as mixers, but that's just Daniel on the phone.

"They sent me coupons for like two years after that," Daniel says. But why, during a prank call, would he have given them his real address? "I'm not a master of deceit' he admits. When the operator asked for his personal information, Daniel did have the presence of mind to make up a name on the spot but lacked the presence of mind to come up with a good one, instead giving his name as "Elfin Jackson."

"Yes, that was quite the awful name. A terrible name. It's a very lame name. *Elfin*, I just couldn't think. It's like a name you'd give a lawn gnome." I figured Daniel must have had some son of history with the name, but no. "I think it just sounded random enough." he says.

Daniel thinks the operator might have been more interested in what he had to say "if only she'd known where I was calling from." But Daniel *did* tell her exactly where he was calling from. I know that because I recorded the call and the operator doesn't sound interested in the least, which surprised me. I've worked phone jobs and would always pounce on any unusual call, just to relieve the boredom. One night on the graveyard shift I even helped the FBI catch some weirdo stalker guy. But I would think that if some guy tells you he's calling from a phone booth in the middle of the Mojavc Desert, you'd almost have to be interested. It was an early indicator that some would be immune to the Booth's charms.

"Well, I got a couple that might do ya. A 1985 Honda Civic."
"Maybe something bigger, Earl. Maybe something you might be able to sleep in."
"Jesus, that's a horrible fuckin' thought."

- Dialogue from the film *Motel Living*

Eventually we noticed that we were sleepy. Daniel and Ponyboy folded themselves back into the cramped front seat lodging accommodations crafted by the Honda Motor Company while I once again curled up on *Whip It!'s* roomier front bench seat.

Unfortunately, sleep promised to be somewhat difficult in the freezing temperatures. Daniel maintains that our trip "involved a degree of preparation." You would certainly think it would have, yet I had neglected to bring warm enough bedding on a mid-winter trip to what I knew to be a pretty cold place. "Maybe you just don't prepare real well," suggests the always-helpful Daniel.

As one does when it's a freezing cold night, I mostly drowsed intermittently rather than slept. At one point I was startled by a red glow illuminating *Whip It!'s* frost-covered windows. I popped my head up. The brake lights on Daniel's Honda were shining from the other side of the Booth. Were my friends deserting me?

I should have known better. It was only a cramped Daniel, dozing with his foot pressed against the brake pedal. I almost woke him up, out of fear he might drain the battery, but soon he shifted positions and the light went out. Another time I awoke when I heard the Honda's engine start up. Again my sleep deprived brain concocted a friends-peeling-out scenario and again it was not the case. Daniel was merely starting the engine in order to run the heater, which he continued to do whenever the cold awakened him and prevented his falling asleep again. That was why neither had taken the Honda's back seat - it was too far from the heater vents.

I started thinking I should have parked behind the Honda's exhaust pipe because I had unknowingly done myself in the eye before the trip by removing *Whip It!'s* heater core for reasons I don't recall. I seem to remember that it was leaking, but what are a few glycol fumes among friends? And who knows but what the fumes might at least have helped me sleep?

"I remember I didn't sleep real good," Daniel says. "That was the first time I tried spending the night in my car and I remember the parking brake kept bumping into my rear and everything. Even though the seats went all the way back. I remember thinking, gosh, I guess these weren t designed to sleep in. Ponyboy agrees. "It was sooooo cold. My god, it was cold. I'm pretty low maintenance, and can get through a lot of different situations, but that was just bone-chilling cold."

Morning Mood

About all a person can think about through a freezing cold night is the sun coming up, and even when sunrise comes it offers only a psychological boost at first. At sunrise the dropping temperature will continue to drop for a time due to scientific principles that interest me more when I am not shaking tiny icicles from my eyebrows.

At the same time, I'll gladly accept a psychological boost any day. I emerged from *Whip It!* and her frost-covered windows into the sharp cold of a Mojave November morning as Daniel and Ponyboy continued to sack out in their little red sleeping pod. In the dim light I took my first look at a sunlit Mojave Phone Booth. You might be able to guess what I said, and I couldn't help but say it out loud: *Wow!*

Maybe because I had dialed the Booth's number so often, it didn't feel like only the second time I had seen it. Media-saturated minds might insist upon interpreting its appearance as *cinematic*, as if nothing is real until recorded on film but to be honest, it did seem cinematic. By sunbeam, as opposed to the light of headlamps, it was easier to sec more evidence of the toll that being alone in the desert had taken on the Booth. Nature and man had done their worst. Its metal had been visibly dulled by sandstorms and pierced by bullets. Its glass had been shot out and strewn all around it.

But, again, *beautiful*. I can't even tell you how beautiful. So, so beautiful. *Mojave, sight of my life, aquirer of my coins. My dial, my tone. Mo-hah-vee: the lips taking a trip of three steps from the shape of an O to stretch, at three, into a smile. Mo. Hah. Vee.*[4]

Had the Booth's panes of glass still been intact, they'd have looked great covered in frost, as our car windows were, reflecting the low rays of the early morning sun. I found myself trying to imagine what the Booth had looked like the day it was first placed there. Clear, unbroken, unscratched panes of glass, the shiny surface of its new metal reflecting sunlight back onto the desert, maybe even a crisp-edged new telephone directory, all as unlike the surroundings as could be.

Knowing no Booth history at the time, I wondered about the people who had installed it. Had they paid any notice to the incongruity of its location? Had they enjoyed taking part in the installation of this marvel? Did they even recognize it as such? When they were done, did they call family or friends to tell them about it? Or was it just another day on the job for them? What would they have thought if they'd known that someday people would travel hundreds and even thousands of miles just to appreciate their work? The engineers who built the Great Pyramid could have had a reasonable expectation that their giant structure would become known across the inhabited world, but technicians installing a phone booth in the remoteness of the Mojave Desert would have had not even a sliver of any such expectation. I once read about an old man who in 1851 had been a member of the first group of Europeans to lay eyes on the Yosemite Valley. Many years later someone asked him to describe the majesty of the moment. "The old man spat over the edge of the veranda and looked reflective for a moment. 'Well, ' he said, 'I'll tell ye. If I'd ha' knowed it was going to be so famous, I'd ha' looked at it." Had the telephone booth installers somehow been able to foresee the Booth's fame,

would they have looked at it differently that day?

I walked the few paces from *Whip It!* to the Booth. On each of my future visits, I never knew with what added decorations the Booth might be adorned, but that day it was exactly as it had been when I'd scribbled my web address inside it three months earlier. I stood under the telephone wires, wondering whose voices might be passing along them and what they might be saying at this hour. I walked back over to *Whip It!* to see whether the moisture and temperature had caused any damage to its album covers. They were covered in frost but appeared to have endured the cold night with no observable damage. I was sure that car had never been anyplace like this in its previous life as an ordinary 1962 Chevrolet Biscayne. I photographed the Booth with the sunrise shining through *Whip It!'s* frosted side windows then placed Wagner on *Whip It!'s* frost-covered windshield for a photo, after using my fingernail to scratch BRRRRR! into the frost.

I was just generally having a ball. Morning is one of my favorite times in the desert. The angle of low sun rays brings out the colors of the desert. There's a similar phenomenon with the setting sun but with a noticeably different quality of light. On my first visit there had been almost a full 360 degrees of lightning strikes. The surrounding mountains were visible only as silhouettes lit for split-seconds by flashes of lightning behind them. In this crisp morning air I could see the circle of mountains ringing the Booth with the morning light sharpening their every contour and color. That made me feel even happier. Having grown up around mountains, I don't see the Egyptian pyramids as mysterious. The desire to break up the monotony of sand dunes with some artificial mountains makes perfect sense to me. Besides, what's the good of being Pharaoh without mountains to be Pharaoh of, even if they have to be made from scratch?

Also surrounding the Booth were Joshua trees. Members of the lily family,Joshua trees are probably most familiar to non-desert dwellers in the form of the bizarre-looking giant plant on the cover of the U2 album *The Joshua Tree*.[5]

My fellow road trippers soon awakened and slowly emerged from their sleeping pod. "We woke up like icicles!" says Ponyboy, but they instantly joined in on the desert amazement. "The landscape was really majestic because it just stretched on forever, one Joshua tree after another," Daniel says. "I just remember thinking how beautiful it was out there, a perfect place. What did we do, throw rocks for a while?"

We actually did pitch a few rocks as we patrolled around and just inhaled the whole atmosphere.

(From Ponyboy's post-trip account)
We each had things to do; there were calls to make, items to bury, markers to construct, shadows to watch, photographs to capture, messages to scrawl, broken glass to collect. We spent two or

three hours merry-making in this fantastic place, conjuring and manifesting the particular magic of complete amusement which Disney spends millions to offer. Here, we found it naturally and without pretense - a few folks in love with the land and the irony of its human occupation.

We spent a good while that morning just marveling at the Booth, its surroundings, the crispness of the air, and the widely spaced forest of Joshua trees "tingling with frost," as Ponyboy put it. The Booth and *Whip It!* were of course obvious photographic subjects, but I also took some more photos of that old pair of sneakers Professor Cardyhouse and I had seen on the first visit, as well as a photo of a large pile of white decorative rock that someone had for some unknown reason dumped way out here, and some years ago judging by the amount of dirt that had built up around the edges of the pile.

I hadn't told anyone I'd be at the Booth, so its phone didn't ring during our visit As on the first visit, I made a few calls, including one to my friend Pete back in Arizona, who recalled it years later. "I was sleeping in, as usual, when the phone rang. Your voice sounded youthful, excited. I remember hanging up and saying to myself, 'Godfrey, what a character,' and then later telling Julie that I got a call from you in the middle of nowhere from a phone booth. She responded with a look I'm sure you've seen many times."

The Booth and the Aiken Cinder Mine sign and the stop sign had all been victims of moron target practice (the kind of shooting where morons are the shooters, not the targets, unfortunately). None of the bullet holes appeared recent. I was strongly tempted to "rescue" the rusted Aiken Cinder Mine sign lying in the weeds but it didn't seem right to take it, even though it looked like it'd been there a long time, so I took photos instead. I decided that if I spoke to Lorene again, I'd ask her whether the sign was a cast-off. (I hadn't yet learned that Lorene's mine was not the Aiken Cinder Mine but the Cima Cinder Mine.) The point became moot after the Booth became famous and the sign (of course) disappeared.

The only Mojave souvenirs I brought back were a chupacabra bone (of scientific interest especially because of its uncanny similarity to a cow vertebra) and a lunch pail full of official shattered Mojave Phone Booth glass I picked out of the din for a project whose outlines I assumed would occur to me later, as had happened with my hundreds of copies of *Whipped Cream and Other Delights*.

Off in the distance, at the base of a cinder cone, I could see evidence of a small cinder mining operation. I wondered whether that was Lorene's mine, whether she could see us, and if so, whether she might come and say hello. (She later told me she could see when people camped at the Booth but, as I've mentioned, desert people are cautious.) Instead we had that entire desert to ourselves, along with its Phone Booth. We'd have stayed there all day, had Daniel and Ponyboy not needed to get back to their jobs.

"I really didn't want to leave that morning," Ponyboy says. "I just remember really having a good time basically doing nothing. You know what I mean? We were really doing nothing. We were totally just *being* there. And

there are very few types of people who can engage with each other while basically doing nothing. So I was really, really enjoying that."

"Strike That. Reverse it."

> It is imperative that your vehicle be in tiptop shape. Many frequent desert travelers have learned from bitter experience to always travel in the company of another vehicle, since the odds of both of them breaking down or becoming stuck are greatly reduced.
>
> - Dennis Casebier et al, *Mojave Road Guide*

Just before we left, I buried beside the Booth the kiddie wading pool Ponyboy had sent me, adding other secret and sacred totems to the small cache. I marked the location with the Booth's guardian pair of sneakers and some Popsicle sticks I had stamped with my web address that were leftover from a Burning Man project. When I returned home, I held a contest to find the artifacts. The winner was a genuine, honest-to-Pete archaeologist named Kurt Heidelberg. Kurt's Booth expedition furnished the growing Mojave Phone Booth saga with yet another web page. In keeping with the Booth website's theme I called it "A Pointless Exercise in Archaeology."

That our cars had made it into the Mojave with no trouble, let alone all the way to the Booth site, might have been partly to blame for the laughably unwarranted confidence I had in our cars' ability to gee us back out again. In turn, this misbegotten certainty led me to ratchet up the stakes. I pointed out to my friends that we already knew what lay on the dirt road that would return us the 12-1/2 miles back to Interstate 15 within half an hour or so. Where would be the adventure in *that*? I suggested that instead of just backtracking, it might be more interesting if we were to continue southward on the dirt trail that had brought us to the Booth, just to see where it went. I mean, a dirt trail has got to lead somewhere, doesn't it? I reasoned that since I-40 runs roughly East-West, if the trail we were on continued in an essentially southerly direction, we were bound to run into I-40 sooner or later, yes?

In Spanish, *if* and *yes* are the same word. I think Spanish might be on to something, there.

Because I did not do the entirety of this reasoning out loud, my companions may have been led to believe that in my brain resided locations storing actual information on the subject.

Whoops.

It took therefore a lot less convincing than it probably should have for them to agree to follow *Whip It!* into unknown territory instead of back along a known road with a known distance we could have depended upon in case of, oh,just to choose a random example, an automotive emergency.

So we struck camp, not that we had actually made a camp, and set off,

Daniel's Honda once again following *Whip It!'s* bumper. Did Ponyboy have any doubt that I knew where I was going? "No. Huh-uh. I think the real issue there is, I didn't really care. I was just along for the ride. I don't think I was even paying close attention. I was like, *Ooooooh, pretty!*"

We threaded our way slowly along, through creosote and Joshua trees, along a glorified jeep trail. For those of you who have never driven in a desert, jeep trails basically consist of two parallel ruts. Running between the ruts is the resulting higher line of earth, often populated by plants and boulders the desert employs for the purpose of scraping undercarriages and breaking axles, a practice these trails had already honed to perfection back when they were wagon trails. Some of these jeep trails in the Mojave are in fact part of the original network of wagon trails blazed across the desert during the 19th century's westward expansion.

To my surprise, the ridge between the ruts gave *Whip It!* no trouble at all. Although the 1962 Biscayne is a model favored for low-rider conversions, pre-conversion Biscaynes actually sit reasonably high off the ground. That was not the case with Daniel's Honda, unfortunately. The little hatchback was suffering a little high-centering or, as Ponyboy more plainly puts it, "dragging on the desert floor" making Daniel "just generally uptight. I think he was about to make me get out and walk."

Obviously, if I'd known about this, I'd have had Ponyboy ride with me in *Whip It!* "I know, I should've," Ponyboy says, "but I didn't want to leave him alone. He was like, 'If the underside of my car gets messed up because of this - !'"

I wasn't entirely oblivious to the trouble behind me, but mostly I was. I'd seen in my rear-view mirror a look of concern on poor Daniel's face but misgauged it. I thought it was at least partly shtick for my benefit. Therefore, instead of in any way trying to reassure my friend, I tried to lighten things up by stopping *Whip It!*, climbing up on its roof, shading my eyes with my hand, and making a big show of squinting in all directions, as if desperately trying to get my bearings. If you like someone playing on your deepest fears for his own idle amusement, I'm a real good pal to have.

Ponyboy later told me that my thoughtless pantomimicry had made an alarming impression. Apparently it's what led Daniel to begin to suspect that this leg of the expedition had been what scientists might call *insufficiently modeled*. I definitely did not sufficiently model that not everyone shares my road trip-induced blind confidence. "You certainly did not, no," says Ponyboy. "I was riding with him. I appreciated his level of anxiety."

"Yeah, that was *really* funny," Daniel says with as much sarcasm as his nature can muster. "I mean, it's funny *now*." Even so, his Honda kept pressing along without any trouble. Daniel says he was "really impressed with the car after that."

Less impressive, very soon, would be our expedition's other automotive member.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the Arctic explorer, says that adventures are a sign of unpreparedness and incompetence. I think be is largely right. nevertheless I like adventure and enjoy taking chances when skill and fortitude play a part. If we never had any adventures, we would never know what "stuff' was in us.

- Everett Ruess

It would have been easy to know what stuff was in Everett Ruess, had his remains ever been found after his final adventure. The 20-year-old Ruess, who liked to boast, "I leave no trace," ended up doing exactly that, disappearing into the desert forever in 1934. I agree with Ruess that Stefansson was probably mostly right about adventure and unpreparedness and incompetence.[6] Even so, I might still be inclined to side with Ruess on the question. Not that it had been my intention for anyone on our trip to end up like Ruess. As slapdash as my half of a plan was, becoming lost on the desert was no part of it. Sure, it was a risk to try crossing an unfamiliar section of a pitiless desert that had claimed the lives of countless people over the centuries, without even a map to tell me where the jeep trail we were following was taking us. Also, we hadn't left word with anyone that we were even going to the Booth, let alone that we were taking a far less-traveled route when leaving it. If we had trouble. we'd be as left to our own devices as poor Everett Ruess was. When we left our houses to take a road trip in those days, we left behind all communication via phone or Internet until we returned. Our only communication with the outside world had been the Mojave Phone Booth, which was getting farther behind us with every hard-won southward mile.

Oddly enough, we appeared to be getting away with it. I was therefore pretty sure, or at least cocksure, that we were going to make it to the 40 freeway without incident. *Whip It!* had been cruising the desert trails practically like a 4x4. I was proud of the old Biscayne.

Before very long (unless you ask Daniel), Kelbaker Road became visible in the distance. In the rear view mirror, I could tell by the look of relief on Daniel's face that he too had spotted it. I knew for a fact that Kelbaker would take us to the 40. Our cars had managed to endure nearly the full stretch from jeep trail to pavement.

I can admit today that I was relieved too. As certain as I had pretended to be, I genuinely did not know where or how far that trail would go. For all I knew, it could have dead-ended before getting anywhere near pavement. So I whooped immodestly out the window, exulting in my triumph of improvisatory navigation.

Unfortunately, "Great triumph's sweetness brev'ty oft abates," as Shakespeare wrote.[7] Moments after *Whip It!'s* tires left the desert surface and

touched asphalt - and I mean *moments* - the engine began making a sort of chuffing noise, such as might be made by a large jungle cat, or a paint brush when you 're forcing the tips of the bristles into the rough parts of a piece of wood a conscientious person would replace rather than try to paint. But the chuffng was louder than that, as if the paintbrush tip measured four feet across.

As is my custom in a crisis, I initially refused to acknowledge the crisis. But this crisis would not be ignored. *Whip It!* alternated between hesitating and violently lurching. Something was very wrong, but I was determined to push on as far as I could to get as close to the 40 as possible, so as to have a better chance of a catching tow. Although paved, Kelbaker Road was not exactly a highly traveled thoroughfare and it also didn't have roadside emergency call boxes, which I would need to summon help.

In an extreme display of dramatic timing, *Whip It!'s* engine shuddered violently and halted the very moment we reached the 1-40 onramp. *Así las barajas son.*[8]

This place is kind of like a Bermuda Triangle for cars.
- Anne Archer's character in *Mojave Moon* (1996)

The 40 freeway was where Ponyboy, Daniel, and I had planned to part ways, the two of them westward to Los Angeles, I eastward to Arizona. I knew Daniel had to work in a few hours, so my brain was taking stock and casting about for options.

A desert marooning resembles an island marooning in that whatever one neglected to bring one will have to do without. In such a situation, one tries to focus on the good things. Thankfully, I was not left entirely at the mercy of the sandy seas of the Mojave. I had been granted two boons: I was marooned on a relatively favorable island (a freeway onramp) and I wasn't alone. This would be no Ballardian *Concrete Island* - style nightmare. Plus, as Ponyboy pointed out, "Remorse is so 1993," which is why I like to road trip with Ponyboy. A good road tripper has to be able to roll with the punches. "And there's *always* some punches," says Ponyboy. There would be time enough to get all horse-faced about it later if I needed to, but ahead of that stood hours of work, wildlife, and wild-eyed desert motel owners.

Whip It!'s engine was an uncomplicated in-line, six-cylinder job, so it didn't seem that there could be all that many possible sources of the trouble. "I loved that car," Ponyboy says, "because when you lifted up the hood, there were like, just the basics under there. You could see everything, and then there was all this space around it." What I used to say about *Sylvie*, my 1965 Mustang, was that you could almost curl up in the engine compartment and take a nap, there was so much room, and *Whip It!*had even more.

What *Whip It!'s* engine had that *Sylvie* lacked was abundant rat shit (until

later, that is, when I stored Sylvie in the same desert yard *Whip It!* had occupied). Earlier that same year I had idiotically climbed into *Whip It!'s* spacious trunk to clean out the mounds of droppings left by the pack rats, for which my lungs would later pay dearly, leading to an initial misdiagnosis of hantavirus. I had never gotten around to a thorough cleaning of *Whip It!'s* engine compartment, leading Ponyhoy to suggest, "Maybe your engine has hantavirus." Always helpful, that Ponyboy.

I'm not exceptionally mechanically inclined but I checked belts, connections, fluids, and anything else I could think of. Everything looked to be in order yet the engine wouldn't start again. Out of gas? The nature of the failure seemed consistent with that diagnosis. Plus, the fuel gauge didn't work, so I truly didn't know *exactly* how much fuel was in the tank. Still, although *Whip It!'s* gas efficiency left room for improvement, it couldn t have emptied its tank in the miles I'd driven since filling up at Baker, barring a fuel leak, but eyes and nose failed to detect evidence of one I even blew out the gas filter in case some gunk in the system, possibly of rodent origin, had dislodged from somewhere and clogged it. There was a little gunk, but not much, and its removal had no good effect.

Mostly because we had to feel like we were doing *something* to solve the problem, and partly because an empty fuel tank was the most hopeful diagnosis, it was decided to go in search of gasoline. The three of us piled as optimistically as we could into Daniel's car to head for the nearest gas station. Unfortunately, the nearest gas station was in Amboy, the remains of a town on old Route 66 about a dozen miles and several decades removed from the Interstate.

You've probably seen the iconic, diner-style "Roy's" sign in movies or commercials. Amboy was founded in 1858 to support the nearby chloride works. By the time Route 66 reached peak popularity in the 1950s hundreds of people lived in Amboy to provide service to travelers.

The Feds doomed Amboy by bringing Interstate 40 westward in 1973, 11-1/2 miles north of town. With their livelihoods destroyed, the townspeople abandoned the place and Roy Crowl's son-in-law, Buster Burris, was left with no choice but to tear down most of the town's buildings to avoid facing the county's onerous tax demands. (It would sadden you to learn how many historic buildings have been destroyed because the owners lacked the money to satisfy annual demands for money issued by one gang of bureaucrats or another.)

I'll bet Roy's was warm and hospitable back when Roy ran the place. Route 66 was popping in those days, and people are said to have stopped at Roy's by the multitude. Likewise, today Amboy is under new ownership and I've heard good things are happening. If only we'd had the good sense to get stranded in the area a few decades earlier or later. In 1997, however, Amboy gave every appearance of being run by a psycho, an appearance that turned out to be incorrect (we later learned it was run by *two* psychos).

Amboy still looked inviting when the three of us saw it that day, solely because it had gas pumps. Amboy consisted basically of a gas station, a diner, and a motel. Unfortunately, it being a Sunday afternoon, all three were closed. Without other options, we knocked on the motel room door marked MANAGER. The door opened and it was clear from his expression that MANAGER was not pleased to have his day of worship interrupted by travelers in need. In the interests of clarity and sarcasm (and in honor of Roy, Amboy, and Evelyn Waugh), we'll call the grumpy manager Mr.Joyboy.

Mr. Joyboy had the look of a man grudgingly taking one final shot at making a go of life. Not coincidentally, it's almost identical to the look of a person coming down from something. It happened to be Sunday, but not even the lyrics of "Sunday Morning Comin' Down" could have prepared us for this guy.

I'd have thought that if one is the type of person to get annoyed by people in dire situations, one wouldn't buy the only gas station for many miles in any direction. Mr. Joyboy wasn't old enough to have been harboring animosity against the Interstate for marginalizing Amboy. He and his partner had not bought the town until decades after the government had killed off the place. In fact, Amboy's new owners appeared to be trying to capitalize on the "quirkiness" of the place. Rumor had it that they were mainly interested in attracting big money from Hollywood filmmakers but had so far succeeded only in attracting small change from a few porn directors.

Faced with a quick and easy earning opportunity, Mr.Joyboy surprised us by claiming he "couldn't" open the pumps. We asked, well, if he couldn't, who could? He then altered tack, claiming he didn't have a gas can we could use. When we pressed him, he admitted he did have a gas can but demanded that we leave him a deposit of $50.

One could have bought multiple gas cans almost anywhere and still gotten change back from a fifty. Nowhere within fifty miles of Amboy, though, so

what could we do? We would have to pay the Amboy price. Ponyboy, Daniel and I pooled our cash and handed it over to Joyboy in exchange for a can full of gas at a ludicrously high price per gallon that would today seem fairly reasonable.

Ponyboy decided she would stay and explore Amboy while Daniel and I took the gasoline back north up Kelbaker Road to *Whip It!* Maybe Mr. Joyboy regarded her as further collateral for his gas can, or maybe Ponyboy wanted to find a bathroom or just take photos. I don't recall In any case, Daniel and I left her behind.

On our way back to the Interstate, we spotted a tarantula crossing the road and Wagner insisted we stop to allow it to crawl across his face. Ponyboy was later thrilled to learn that while she was killing time in Amboy with a psycho on the loose, "You guys had to take some pictures!" Ponyboy had a point but such are the demands Wagner makes upon a person who undertakes to carry him around and be party to his doings, and since he more or less demands that I lug him around and be party to his doings, I'm pretty much at his bidding. "One pays heavily for being a disciple of Wagner," said Nietzsche. My lower back has often agreed.

Even so, my evaluation of traveling companions is heavily biased toward those who show a willingness to indulge Wagner's whims. Believe you me, a more whim-indulgent fellow than Daniel never tromped on the brakes in the Mojave at the sight of a tarantula. Upon completion of Wagner's tarantula photo-tableau (not his first nor his last - Wagner highly favors tarantula photo-tableaus), we continued on our way back to I-40 and the 120 stranded Dolores Ericksons that covered *Whip It!*

Back in Amboy, Ponyboy was displaying her best rolling-with-the-punches form. Although it was at her request that she was now wandering Amboy in search of a bathroom, or at least a bush or a crater. (Amboy does have a huge crater. It's called Amboy Crater.) I'd like to believe that had adversity not clouded my judgment, I'd at least have questioned hers. But Ponyboy, in full rescue mode, had shooed us off without a thought. That's what Ponyboy is like.

So Daniel and I left her at the mercy of a sketchy and possibly drug-scrambled goon. That's not really what Daniel and I are like.

But that is what Daniel and I did.

Back at *Whip It!*I emptied the gasoline into the tank, pumped the gas pedal and cranked the engine. No dice.

Daniel then set out on his second trip to Amboy to pick up Ponyboy, return the gas can, and retrieve our deposit money. I told him if I got *Whip It!* running I'd meet up with them either in Amboy or on the way there. I sat in *Whip It!* and watched cars go by on the freeway overpass overhead. When you're marooned on the highway, every whiz and whoosh of a passing vehicle sounds like the last plane to Lisbon in Casablanca. I heard the voice of Bogart in my head: "Everybody has problems. Yours may work out."

I tried gapping the spark plugs again out of desperation, or boredom or a desire to vindicate my conviction that engine repair is not my strong suit. If you want to know how to affix records and album covers to a car so they'll kind of stay on for a little while, I'm your guy. But if you want to know how to fix a car that's broken down beside a highway, someone else should probably be your guy. I can troubleshoot and fix basic automotive issues, but I'm not terrific at arcane ones such as this seemed to be. It was therefore unlikely to pay dividends for me to dive back into the engine compartment. But I did anyway and somehow, against all odds, my tinkering had some good effect: *Whip It!'s* engine actually fired up!

I closed the hood, hopped in, and steered southward beneath the I-40 overpass and made for Amboy. If *Whip It!* was still running strong by Amboy, the three of us could split up there and head in opposite directions on Route 66 toward our respective homes.

My optimism on road trips can be truly laughable. The Biscayne ran well - briefly. Then, bucking like a square-wheeled steam wagon, *Whip It!* sputtered and chuffed to a halt on the desert two-lane, miles from the Interstate, miles from Amboy, miles from anything. That meant extra miles for a tow truck, if I could even get a tow truck. Nice work, me.

I knew now that I wasn't dealing with a fuel leak or blockage. Something serious was wrong with my poor car. Still, I kept on monkeying with anything that appeared to be an engine part and awaited further rescue.

As time passed I began to worry a little about Daniel and Ponyboy and wonder what could be taking them so long in Amboy. When at last they pulled up, they emerged breathless and excited and swearing that whatever our next plan was, we would definitely *not* be returning to Amboy under any circumstances.

"The guy threatened us!" Ponyboy shouted. "*With a gun.*"

If everything runs smoothly, then it's not an adventure.
- Whitewater Kayaker's Little Book of Wisdom (#100)

In our absence Ponyboy had been having an enjoyable time wandering around Amboy.

"I had to go to the bathroom, and there was nothing - the restaurant was closed and I wasn't about to try and find that guy, so I went poking around. I walked all up and down the railroad tracks and tried to break into the church because I spotted a huge mural on the back wall. It was really blue, all different shades of blue, and it was of course some sort of biblical thing, Moses parting the Red Sea. And then I found a partially deflated rubber ball, obviously belonging at some point to a very proud child who had written his name in cursive all over it along with other strange and wonderful scribblings. It was just this wholly desolate, barren place, and yet there was this ball with

this little boy's name printed on it but no sign of any little boy anywhere. I sat for a while in a weeded-over fountain which looked more like a folk art site in the making, soaking up the sun. And then the train went by and the train was amazingly long and blew its whistle a whole lot. It was just this surreal couple of hours."

Things got more surreal when Daniel returned. He picked up Ponyboy and they went back over to Roy's to get our pooled gas can deposit money back. This turned out to be not in accordance with Mr. Joyboy's desires. He was now regarding our $50 not as a deposit but as a purchase price. In his view, he'd sold a $5 gas can for $50.

This was not Daniel's view. "Daniel is so unassuming," says Ponyboy, "and he looks so friendly and he's so nice and he's got that sort of can-do spirit about him, but that guy tried to mess with us." I later found lots of similar online testimony about the former owners of Roy's. "He was insane," Daniel says. "I've heard so many things about that guy from different people. He's just insane."

But Daniel was up to the challenge. He's tall and while I wouldn't describe him as imposing, I can see how he could give that impression. "Daniel just, like, lost it," says Ponyboy. "He got really intense at the guy. He didn't go aggro. He just sort of stiffened up. You know what I mean? Like, *I'm not gonna take that crap from you*. The guy really bristled at that." Then Ponyboy saw a glint of metal and thought, "Holy cow! That guy's trying to pull a gun on us!"

Mr.Joyboy did indeed have a gun in his waistband. But he didn't draw it. "Yeah, he kind of showed it," Ponyboy recalls, "and tried to flex his *capacity*, so to speak."

This movie seemed to be shifting to a different genre altogether. A gun in the waistband serves the same purpose as one of those passive-aggressive, innocent·on-the-surface jibes that's meant to sting extra hard because of its plausible deniability. "*What? All I said was* ... "It's all in the tone, and the tone of the gun in this guy's waistband was saying: *You need to walk away from your $50.*

I wouldn't suggest that Daniel doesn't take his continued existence seriously, but, *damn*. Daniel laughs when he thinks about it now. "Here the whole time I'm haggling with him over $50 and he had a *gun*."

To be fair, all three of us were close to broke at the time, so $50 was not nothing to us. Accordingly, in some manner neither Daniel nor Ponyboy seems able to recall in any detail, Daniel managed to talk our deposit money from Joyboy's pocket back into his and frame Amboy in his rear-view mirror.

It's still hard to believe we ever agreed to leave Ponyboy in Amboy to fend for herself the whole time. "You left me with a gunslinger!" she loves to not-entirely-accurately remind us. She left without the old ball she'd found. "Until that nasty little incident, I was really looking forward to keeping it."

On the Hook

> After being towed to Rodeo and later receiving
> a goodly repair bill, I believe the garageman told us
> the finnegan pin jammed, closing the fluter valve.
> I can't be sure now.
>
> - Weldon F. Heald, *The Chirichua Mountains*

I knew a few swanks in 1997 who had beepers, but only one person I knew, a shadowy individual known by the code name Agent Hesby, possessed a cellular phone. I seem to remember it being approximately the size of a fishing tackle box.

I am not now nor have I ever been, a swank. I had no cell phone in 1997, nor did Daniel, nor did Ponyboy. For non-swanks in our situation, the only option was to note the nearest mile marker to *Whip It!'s* position on Kelbaker road and then drive back to the freeway to use one of the emergency call boxes installed at one-mile intervals.

It seems nuts when I think about it now, but I'd had no qualms over setting out on a long desert road trip in a three-and-a-half-decade-old automobile without carrying any sort of roadside assistance plan. Luckily, Daniel had one and generously offered to use it in *Whip It!'s* aid.[9]

Roadside emergency phones are battery-powered and charged by small solar panels. We discovered that their batteries have the capacity only for quick emergency chats. Long waits on hold with AAA had not been factored into the design process. A solar-powered roadside phone would run out of juice as I waited on hold for an auto club operator and we'd have to drive another mile down the 40 to the next phone, which meant starting again at the end of the call queue. It wasn't until the fourth milepost that I finally heard the voice of an actual human whom I begged not to put me on hold until I could report *Whip It!s* location on lonely Kelbaker Road. When I said 'Kelbaker Road, I could have sworn I heard a derisive snort in response. It might have just been the wind. Hell, by that point, it could have been me.

Daniel and Ponyboy then gave me one further ride, back to *Whip It!*, and waited with me for the tow truck to arrive. All in a day's work for priceless pals. They didn't even make fun of me when I gave blowing out the fuel filter a third try, just to pass the time. There were no more tarantulas looking for modeling work so again I gapped the spark plugs. Then I tried to get the trunk lid closed - it had chosen this perfect day to pop a hinge spring.

For reasons I chose to believe were related to my banging on the trunk lid in frustration, *Whip It* did start running once more but managed only a couple hundred feet, not even far enough to confuse the tow truck driver as to our location, even if our two cars hadn't been the only cars on that road for miles in either direction. I was admittedly somewhat preoccupied, but I don't recall a single car passing by the whole time we waited. With potential customers so

scarce, Mr. Joyboy *must* have been high to threaten two of them with a pistol.

By late afternoon, the temperature was falling with the sun. The three of us slipped back into our habit of repeatedly remarking how cold it was. But even though I was facing an uncertain future at a garage to be named later and Daniel and Ponyboy would have to figure out how to salvage their employment after spending the day rescuing me instead of heading back to their jobs, we already appreciated the proportions of the adventure we'd experienced over the past three days.

"That trip was a nail-biter from beginning to end," Ponyboy says, accurately describing about 80% of *Whip It!'s* journeys. It was like traveling with someone who'd had a bomb implanted in a wisdom tooth by really clever terrorists. Never a dull moment with an explosive wisdom tooth car.

Even after a tense desert crossing, a day of a car trouble situation not of his own making, and being threatened by a kook with a gun, Daniel was still feeling the Booth glow. "I remember thinking it was just the greatest, really wonderful. It was like one of those movies - I haven't seen that movie yet, with Jack Nicholson walking through the desert with no dialogue for three hours," Daniel says, and I'm certain I will agree, if I ever figure out what movie that might be.

At last a tow truck arrived. For Ponyboy and Daniel the ordeal was at an end. Both made it back to their jobs, though not without adventure and not necessarily on time. Ponyboy's tale of her trip back north to Berkeley included the sentence "got to the Grape's to drop off some bones," and she was also harassed and followed by some crazed trucker. Daniel's new Amboy gun anecdote prompted Frank the salad chef one of Daniel's catering coworkers, to take Daniel to a shooting range, where his newly revealed prowess with a gun was so impressive that Daniel told me, "Frank never gave me a hard time after that. He gave me every one of my salads on time."

Every road trip has its own unique character formed by its participants and events. They're often powerful and formative experiences, such that when you see someone you've road tripped with, as Ponyboy says, "It's really like no time has passed at all." Even when you're a little bit dejected while waiting in the cold for a tow truck to an unknown future in some auto shop somewhere, you find yourself thinking, *One day, this is going to be a story I tell*. "And that," says Ponyboy, "will live for-ev-ah!"

As Daniel and Ponyboy motored westward, the tow truck transported *Whip It!* and me 80 miles to the nearest eastward town, Needles. After three days in Needles, I couldn't resist mentally adding another *'s'* to the end of Needles, another "Gateway to Death Valley" town that was instead my Gateway to Three Days in a $16-Per-Night Motel while *Whip It!*'s mechanical problem confused Dennis and Dean, the mechanics across the street, and

Whip It!'s rodent odors confused their gloriously named garage cat, Shop Mop.

The mechanics eventually figured out that the distributor shaft's roll pin had snapped. It was easy enough for them to replace the pin and send me on my way back to Arizona. What was hard to figure out was why the newly installed roll pin snapped a second time, no more than 20 miles into the desert south of Needles. *Not again*, I shouted for the first of what would be dozens of times along roadside locations spread across this land that was made for you and me but evidently not for cars whose distributor shaft roll pins just couldn't seem to keep it together. There's an old song that goes, "Ah, ha, ha! She hum like a bee/ The Chevrolet Six can't be beat!" I was about ready to pick up a crowbar and prove that beating a Chevrolet Six was quite possible indeed.

After being towed back to Needles, I checked back into my $16-a-night motel. This road trip taught me that if you were going to drive *Whip It!*, you were in only nominal control. Ultimate control belonged to the car, and you stopped when and where its tiny distributor shaft roll pin said you stopped. I learned the same lesson on many subsequent road trips. I sometimes learn a little slowly.

For the second time, the mechanics pronounced *Whip It!* repaired. This time, I didn't even make it out of Needles before breaking down on the 40, practically within sight of the garage. "Back on the hook again!" the tow truck driver marveled as he hoisted *Whip It!* for the third time.

I was out of patience. Also, I was out of clean clothes and almost out of cash. I started thinking I should maybe look for an apartment and a job in Needles. I occupied myself by wandering the town on foot, exploring an abandoned-looking old Harvey House and casually stopping in at a National Park Service office, where the ranger on duty said he had never heard of any remote telephone booth existing in the recently designated "Mojave National Preserve." Would that every NPS bureaucrat could have remained so ignorant, in light of subsequent events.

At around 7 p.m., Dennis and Dean assured me - for the third time - that *Whip It!* was fixed. It felt by now almost like an anniversary or something, so we held an impromptu beer celebration, ended by a phone call from Dean's wife. "That's the downfall of being married to somebody smarter than yourself," Dean remarked as he placed the shop phone back on the hook. "Ya can't get away with *nothin'*."

On this attempted escape I wasn't going to be able to get away with nothin' either. The garage would be closed during *Whip It!'s* late-night attempt to cross the desert. If it broke down this time, I'd be spending the night huddled on *Whip It!'s* from seat in the cold desert along Route 95. After three days, three nights, and three towings, all I could do was trust *Whip It!* to hold itself together and get me back home to Arizona.

To my surprise, *Whip It!* hummed along perfectly. When her headlamps illuminated mile marker 27 on SR95 where she'd faltered after the first repair

attempt, I felt a wave of relief and confidence that lasted me all the way back to Arizona, where *Whip It!* scooted back into my carport a few hours later, looking surprisingly ready for another road trip to the Booth.

The Whitewater Kayaker' Little Book of Wisdom says, "The definition of a successful expedition is: A disaster you wouldn't have missed for anything in the world." Back then, I whole-heartedly agreed with that sentiment. I've since reached a stage in life where one's transportation breaking down and stranding one all over the country just isn't as funny as it once was. Nowadays I tend to care a little less about the retrospective glance and a little more about actual forward movement when I step on a gas pedal.

And yet - had I held out for reliable transportation in years past, I'd never have met Shop Mop the Cat in Needles, or Bones the Carver in rural Texas, or the Reno jazz mechanic who'd jammed with Herb Alpert, or a host of other characters. With *Whip It!* every trip was an Anabasis, with me as Xenophon and DeuceOfClubs.com as the chronicle. Sometimes the most interesting trajectory is a ricochet.

Even so, a sensible person might suppose I would never even have considered driving *Whip It!* on my next trip to the Booth. Like Bugs Bunny, I might say of that sensible person, "He don't know me vewy well, do he?"

NOTES

4 Apologies to Nabokov, but it did occur to me only just now that it might not be obvious how to pronounce *Mojave*. I knew someone who pronounced it *mo-HAWF-ay*, with an exaggeratedly imagined Spanish accent, sort of how goofballs in movies will pronounce karate as *kara-TAY*, which is even worse

than pronouncing Mojave's *j* as a *j*. instead,just say, mo-HAH-vee.

5 I read somewhere that after *The Joshua Tree* came out, Bono was worried that someone would find the actual tree depicted on the cover, uproot it, and show up at a U2 concert with it. U2 fans did eventually track down the tree and used to make pilgrimages to the Mojave to visit it (say, that sounds familiar). Thankfully, the Joshua tree was never uprooted but instead managed to die a natural death in 2000. U2 fans still visit its decaying remains. In 2011 a European couple died of exposure after traveling all the way from the Netherlands to search for the spot where the dead tree lies.

6 Stefansson wrote another book whose title could easily have been the the of the book you are reading: *Adventures in Error*.

7 Or damned well should have.

8 "That's how the cards are," from the Luis Arcaraz song, "As de Corazones."

9 The following year, a pal of mine lent me his card, which I abused nearly to the point of cancellation by getting towed six times in the space of nine months. They sent him a letter telling him to get the Biscayne fxed or get lost. Later, AAA limited menbers to three emergencies per year. I'm sorry if *Whip It!* played any part in changing roadside emergency policy for the worse.

REACTION

TOO MUCH TIME ON YOUR HANDS

> An Internet legend of sorts, The Mojave Booth has become an object of veneration among Internet users with a great deal of spare time.
>
> *-OC Weekly*

"Somebody has too much spare time."
"You have too much time on your hands."
Get a life!"

Anyone who follows pursuits outside the norm regular!y hears comments such as those. I've heard them over and over again regarding my interest in many different subjects but especially with reference to the Mojave Booth. I came to refer to "too much time on our hands" as The Phrase That Is Not To Be Repeated.

I think a lot of people don't really mean it when they say it but just pick up these put-downs from TV, such as when TV news readers repeat them while archly shaking their heads after having offered up what they have framed as a wacky "human interest story" (that usually fails to express much genuine interest in humans). Penn Jillette points out that these expressions stem from the same cynical stance.

> "Get a life!" If that's ever been said to you, be proud. Passion is what life really is and that command steps on it. Using the phrase "get a life" to essentially say, "be more like the norm," "be more normal," really bothers me. The people they say say "get a life" to are always people wjo have some obsssion in their life that the person saying "get a life" does not approve of.[1]

To my way of thinking, obsessions are *key.* I'm in agreement with novelist

J.G. Ballard:

> All you can do is cling to your own obsessions - all of them; to the end. Be honest with them; follow them and your own personal mythology out of them and follow that mythology: follow those' obsessions like stepping stones in front of a sleepwalker. I think if you compromise with your own obsessions, that way lies disaster.

Another novelist, Patricia Highsmith, boiled it down even further: "Obsessions are the only things that matter."

That had never been the majority view regarding my obsession with a desert Phone Booth. Even though the Booth Project was a subject sufficiently substantive to catch peoples' interest enough to prompt them to write me, what many of them wrote was, "You have too much time on your hands" or equally disparaging messages.[2]

The Internet managed to spawn an expression even shorter and more dismissive than "too much spare time" and "get a life," a single word of only three letters: *meh*. As someone who's been on the receiving end of boatloads of *meh* since before the word *meh* even existed, I loved what John Hodgman had to say about it on Twitter so much that I asked his permission to quote his series of Tweets in full.[3]

@hodgman:	Did I ever tell you people how much I hate the word "meh"? Nothing announces "I have missed the point" more than that word.
@hodgman:	It is the essence of blinkered Internet malcontentism. And a rejection of joy. Also: 12 hive mehs in the replies SO FAR
@hodgman:	By definition, it may mean lack of interest (although simple silence would be a more damning and sincere response, in that case)
@hodgman:	But in use, it almost universally seems to signal: I am just interested enough to make one last joyless, nitpicky swipe and then disappear
@hodgman:	It's part of the toxic Internet art of constant callous one

upmanship. And it is a sort of art, but not for me.

Someone else said of *meh* on Twitter, "I wish that the first thing Neil Armstrong had said on the moon was 'Meh.' " If you think about it, Armstrong *did* say "Meh," after a fashion, if you go by the cheerless, unflappable astronaut-ish stoicism in his voice as he stepped onto the surface of the moon. Yes, I know it s the result of pilot training, and yes, I know the astronauts really were excited, and yes, I do understand the value of a cool head under pressure, &c. &c. &c.

But *still*! Think how you'd react to being the first human being to set foot on *the* Moon.

> They tried ... a piece about the banality of the American space program, including the fact that one astronaut's initial impression of the moon was that it looked like Galveston Bay. "For god's sake," they thought, "they could have sent these guys anywhere and it would look like Galveston Bay to them. Why hadn't the Americans sent ' someone like Allen Ginsberg?"[4]

To be fair as gaga as earthlings were at the first moon landing, subsequent moon landings left them almost blasé. And if people could be blasé about moon landings, imagine how blasé they could be about a phone booth in the desert. Most had been. That was about to change.

NOTES

1 Penn Jillette, "Get a Life," from his Internet video series, *Penn Says*.

2 'That guy has too much spare time" is one of the most odious, intellectually dishonest, dismissive things a person can say. It disguises a vicious ad-hominem attack as a lighthearted verbal shrug. The subtext of the remark is that the subject's passions - this remark is almost always directed at someone engaged in some labor of love - are so meritless that their specific shortcomings don't even warrant discussion. The subtext is that any sane person who considers these passions will immediately see their total worthlessness. To direct this remark at someone is to utterly dismiss their personal fire and so their ability to distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy. - Cory Doctorow

3 I also loved how he expressed his permission: "YOU MAY QUOTE. Very flattered. That is all. Jh"

4 Josh Karp, *A Futile and Sutpid Gesture: How Doug Kerney and National Lampoon Changed Comedy Forever*

FAME

THE BOOTH SCORES A MEDIA HIT

Oh, it's going to get *weird* now, isn't it?
-Ed, *Rubin and Ed*

The egg tooth of the Mojave Phone Booth's fame was a simple email message I received about live months after my second Booth visit It was from a New Yorker named Mark Thomas, a payphone enthusiast who had stumbled across my Mojave Phone Booth Project website. Mark ran, and still runs, a web-based, payphone-related project that he named as imaginatively as I named mine: The Payphone Project. His website describes his project as follows: "The original intention of the Payphone Project was to promote random contacts among complete strangers. By listing public payphone numbers throughout America I invited people to pick up the phone and call some random street corner in some random town and talk to whoever answered."

Clearly this was a man well placed to understand the Mojave Phone Booth Project, and he did.

> Date: Mon, 6 Apr 1998
> Subject: what a great story
> i'm equally fixated on payphones. would you mind if i added a link to your story from my site? such a great story. i don't know what else to say ...

Within half an hour he sent another email.

> i can't tell you why, but i read the thing again, i'm like tingling all over for some reason. maybe to think of so many similar experiences I indulged in but have never related to anyone. your story is

a classic.

A friend of mine, Nabokov scholar Juan Martinez, pointed out to me something Nabokov wrote in *Lectures on Literature* that comes to mind in this connection: "We are liable to lose the best of life if we do not know how to tingle." It reminded me of a passage from the most world-shattering book of my childhood, Jim Bouton's *Ball Four*, in which Bouton recalled how as a kid he had dreamed of just running across the outfield grass of a major league ballpark but years later, as a major league ballplayer routinely crossing the outfield grass on his way to the bullpen before a game, he realized, "now, sometimes I forget to tingle."

So far, I hadn't forgotten to tingle about the Booth since the night I had first heard of it. Thanks to Mark, a whole lot more people would soon start tingling about it as well because little more than a week later, a reporter emailed me who was writing a story on Mark's Payphone Project for some minor, small-town newspaper I believe she said was called the *New York Times* - maybe you've heard of it?

Some people still haven't forgiven me for giving the flick that set this media tumbleweed tumbling and eventually the Booth with it. But it wasn't by design that I became the demiurge of the Booth phenomenon. It's worth noting again how different the Internet of the late 1990s was from today's Internet, when increasing numbers of ordinary people were only just beginning to flood the internet. Included in that flood, however, were reporters, who began glomming stories from the Internet (despite often bracketing them with snide or disparaging comments about the Internet).

That was largely how The Mojave Phone Booth was introduced to the world at large, as one of those "wacky," *Hoo-boy-only-on-the-Interet-am-I-right-folks* stories that were a staple of newspapers even before newspapers figured out that the future won't be recorded on newsprint. In 1998, the journalistic establishment still tended to view the Internet as a non-serious upstart rather than as an opportunity, let alone as a successor.

On May 14, Thomas emailed to break the news of our newsworthiness after the manner of Barry Manilow: "Looks like we made it." The *Times* article was entitled, "If a Pay Phone Rings, Who Will Answer?" The reporter didn't end up using any of my answers to the questions she'd asked me, instead reworking material I had written and posted to Deuce of Clubs. She momentarily gave me hope for journalism by not botching the story or even the quote from the Booth website. Let the record show that the first mention of the Mojave Phone Booth project in print was not bad at all.

> The Payphone Project doesn't take a sardonic approach to pay phone calling. The site's esthetic, if you will, is perhaps best exemplified by Godfrey Daniels, whose interest in one remotely located pay phone evolved into a personal pilgrimage.
>
> Daniels's home page tells how he got the number for a phone booth in the middle of the Mojave Desert and what happened the day someone answered.
>
> Daniels eventually visited the booth. "It was just as I had imagined it," he said later, "a lonely communications outpost at the end of a long, long chain of telephone poles. All its glass had been

shot out, but I thought it was beautiful."

His journey complete, Daniels inscribed his Web address on the phone and photographed the booth.

A comment from Mark ended the story nicely:

"The point of my site is simply to get people talking to each other," Thomas said. "I think of pay phones as points of contact - narrowcast devices. I hope my site can encourage more stories like Godfrey's to happen. To most people, pay phones exist to have calls placed from them, not the other way around. Next time you hear a ringing pay phone, I want you to wonder, *Is it for me?*"

A hit, a very palpable hit.
- Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Seeing a reference to a formerly unknown phone booth of one's personal acquaintance in an internationally distributed newspaper was a more bizarre experience than I would have predicted. I felt as I imagine Zenas the lawyer, whoever he was, might have felt upon finding himself mentioned in Holy Scripture, if only peripherally. I regarded the Mojave Phone Booth Project's appearance in print as a media hit. Though I hadn't engineered the appearance, I was happy to have played a part in something being mentioned in a major news outlet that could be construed as not quite belonging there - a sort of pop culture OOPArt.

A good media hit should also be in some form an expectancy violation. I was pretty sure ideas like the Payphone Project and the Mojave Phone Booth Project could be counted on to violate the expectancy of a decent-sized percentage of the newspaper's readership. Readers running across such ideas over morning coffee or during a train commute to or from work might undergo a pattern interrupt experience similar to, say, encountering a cleverly or subversively defaced billboard.

Renowned prankster Alan Abel judged his operations to be successful by the degree to which they managed to break into the mainstream media. What right-thinking person hasn't at one time or another wanted to go metaphorically upside the head of the media, which blitzes us with its messages all our lives? I felt almost as if we had infiltrated a stronghold, using the enemy's own artillery to lob back a rejoinder. A media hit was one thing, but a media hit on the Grey Lady? That felt like victory.

I may have been a tad over-optimistic in those days.

Given that the Mojave Phone Booth Project was merely an adjunct subject of the *Times* article about the Payphone Project, I didn't expect anything to come of it. I was wrong. Deuce of Clubs daily readership immediately spiked,

linkage from other websites increased, and emails poured in: "What a riot!"; "Terrific telephony"; "Egads, man, you've gone mainstream!!" Mark would email from time to time to let me know about further media hits. He said newspapers all over the world were running articles because of the *New York Times* story, which underscored what a favorite professor once told me about how the media world works: one news outlet reports something and other outlets report on the reporting or sometimes merely repeat the reporting. If even an unsubstantiated rumor gets into *The New York Times*, the next day the same story appears in another news source, except now the rumor gains credence because it's prefaced with "The New York Times reports." Often reporters following in the wake of an existing story never even check the original.[4] This reportorial wake riding also occurs internationally. Early on there was even a case of an overseas columnist who had written about the Payphone Project and the Mojave Phone Booth Project being interviewed about those projects. Even he thought that was weird. "I would have thought they'd interview the creators of the sites, but who am I to argue?"

The Booth received its first international email on Cinco de Mayo. Soon after that, I pulled from my post office box a large manila envelope bearing Swedish postage. At first I thought it was probably from a certain Swedish guy who used to send me bizarre emails regarding an Arizona TV preacher and miracle healer named Neal Frisby, at whom I had poked a little fun on Deuce of Clubs. Instead it was an article entitled "Ring en telefonkiosk," a news story about the Mojave Phone Booth clipped from a Swedish newspaper. It was kind of mind-blowing to see myself quoted in a language I can't read.

The Booth having established a European beachhead, people from many lands began sending copies of Booth articles from their local newspapers and magazines to the Arizona post office box listed on my website.

The Booth story spread even more quickly online, especially by way of r-zines. UK-based *Need to Know* ("Britain's most sarcastic high-tech weekly newsletter') sent the Booth site's URL to their 10,000+ subscribers as "our favourite URL of the year so far." Nesurfer Digest circulated the story under the headline "A Boy and his Payphone," saying the story "just keeps getting better as you go along." Holland's e-zines seemed to pick up on it right away. Publishnet ("hilarious") and Daily Planet (which a Dutch correspondent told me was "the biggest e-zine in Holland") both gave the story the headline "Een telefoontje met nergens" ("A phone call to nowhere"), describing how an American desert dweller decided to execute a most curious investigation."

The Booth site began to accumulate goofy web "awards" such as "Site of the Day" and - my favorite "Waste of the Day." Years later, the Booth would be posthumously voted one of the Top 10 Most Peculiar Places in the world, appearing on the list alongside Sealand, a penis museum, and a town named Fucking, Austria. A Serbo-Croat e-zine described me as "lonely Godfrey," who "stubbornly tries to contact anyone using the only phone in the Mojave

Desert." Netreader, Rewired, and many other "of the day" sites (e.g., Pretty Strange Site of the Day, Site du Jour of the Day [*sic*]) picked up on it. In the UK, Lander Kahney honored The Booth by pairing it with the Singing Lunch Lady. (One email, after predictably noting "I, too, have to concur, you have way too much time on your hands," sarcastically suggested, "Why not try putting your URL on the moon - that'll get you a lot of media attention." Even at this early stage that would already have seemed superfluous.)

There was some snark, of course - "Though in most people's eyes somebody who obsessively dials the number of a phone booth way out in the middle of the Mojave Dessert [*sic*] would be seen as a bit of a wacko, this is the World Wide Web. In cyberspace, someone who documents his obsession on a web page is a genius!" - but most write-ups were complimentary, if only vaguely so, or at least amused. Debug, a German site, called the Booth story a "fairy tale of the communication age," saying (as charmingly machine-translated by then-Alta Vista's Babelfish) that "A part of the fascination, which lies in this merry activity, is based reliably on the almost sensation, which would mean it to hear at the other end a human voice at one time." I'd add a [*sic*] there, except I don't know that I could have said it better myself. Long live merry activities!

Phone phreaks - people who like to learn about, explore, or hack telephone systems - were quick to appreciate the Booth and its possibilities. On May 3, I heard from RedBoxChiliPepper, founder of PhoneLosers.org, who wrote, "Just wanted to let you know that your adventures with the Mojave Desert payphone were truly inspiring! I've been just your average pay phone addict for most of my life and love hearing stories like yours."

The day the *Times* story was published I received more email regarding the Mojave Phone Booth than I had in all its days up until then. A sample of the comments:

- Just wanted to drop you a quick note and let you know how much I appreciated your Mojave Phone Booth story. I've attempted to explain my weird fascination with "remoteness" to people and haven't had much luck, so it s a pleasant thing to see that someone else appreciates it.
- You have restored the dignity of a fellow seeker-of-the-absurd-and-useless, and made a girl happy. Where on earth do you find these places? The funeral museum, the phone booth, etc. Why don't I ever find strange, you-went-where?-and-why? places to go?
- I don't think i have ever been on a website for 2 hours! Great & very fascinating stuff. I even called the booth from Holland, no answer. But I'll try again!
- I must say, I'm impressed. What first came about as a very *silly* and albeit fairly humorous story finished up in classic fairy tale fashion, a beautiful ending to a wonderful story. This is no bullshit mind you, I nearly had tears in my eyes when you declared the first person to be called from the booth would be the writer of the Mojave books, Dennis. Fabulous passion and excitement you showed, the fabulous energy and conviction so many people seem to miss. I'm not sure if you ever realized how powerful your story really is. It's very well done, from the organization of your timeline to your humour and fun in your writing style. The funniest thing of all is how well you've succeeded in making serious people laugh and appreciate such a crazy idea. The best thing on the Internet I've read in some time. Hats off, and never stop.
- The greatest Saturday morning time kill I ever had with my clothes on.

On August 21, frantically preparing for return trips to the Booth and Burning Man, I got an email that within a day made me even busier, from a subscription news service that provided material - "wacky" news stories for use as time and space fillers - to drive-time radio jocks or newspaper editors who don't read the *New York Times*, I guess. The following was the write-up received by media outlets everywhere:

> TEMPE, Arizona (Wireless Flash) - A pay phone booth miles from civilization is turning into a bizarre tourist attraction. The phone booth is off Interstate 15 in California's Mojave Desert and is located 15 miles from the nearest town - literally in the middle of nowhere.
>
> This Thursday night (Aug. 27), the remote phone booth will become a telephonic Mecca thanks to a Tempe, Arizona, man who is so fascinated with the pay phone booth that he's invited people from around the world to meet him in the desert and pay homage to the bizarre booth. Computer expert Gottfried Danneels admits he's so intrigued with the remote pay phone that he's dialed the number every day for more than a year just to see who might answer.
>
> So far, Danneels says the phone has only been picked up once - by a woman who told him the booth has been in the middle of nowhere since the 1940s.
>
> If you're interested in calling the boonies in the remote chance that someone will answer, here's the number: 760-733-9969.

I swear to you that I have never described myself, to that writer or anyone else, as a "computer expert." A cursory glance at my ineptly hand-coded website would expose that lie. However, I almost certainly did give the spelling of my name as *Godfried Danneels* (long story that I'll put in a footnote for anyone who might be interested).[5] I suppose it's enough to say that one will sometimes do odd things when hip-deep in other odd things.

At any rate, thanks to the press release, I suddenly took on the additional project of appearing on radio shows worldwide. I loathe the very idea of appearing in photographs and am therefore also not a fan of appearing on television, so I turned down all those requests. But I have few qualms about blathering on the radio, even if it took some getting used to. At first the rhythms of being interviewed were unfamiliar and I probably came off like Notker the Stammerer, but it took only a few interviews to become relatively comfortable.

When I knew I'd be on a station where friends could pick up the broadcast (few radio stations broadcast over the Internet in 1998), I tried to give them advance notice to see if there happened to be any words they'd like to hear spoken over their local airwaves. I let Professor Cardyhouse know when I was scheduled to appear on the Drew & Mike radio show on Detroit's WRIF (slogan: "WRIF! Everything That Rocks!"). The Professor requested I give "a shout-out to my Detroit homies." I wasn't quite sure how to work in a thing like that smoothly, so I just interrupted the interview and repeated the phrase verbatim, as flatly as possible. "Excuse me, but I'd like to give a 'shout out' to my Detroit 'homies.' "

I found it so odd that my voice was being broadcast around the world merely because of putting a telephone booth in a different light, focusing attention on a type of object people in cities all over the Earth would have seen thousands of times in their lives although, arguably, without ever really

seeing at all.

All of this activity vastly increased the response to the project. What I most enjoyed about the project were the original contributions. For example, on July 3, Lazlo Nibble found the Booth site on the TerraServer satellite photo repository, which I had tried and failed to do. But of all the reactions to the *Times* story, my favorite came from - of course - Girl Trouble, who were amazed at what their zine had wrought. "Oh My Gawd! We Can't Believe It," was the email subject line. "I am going out and get one today!!!!!" K. P. Kendall (the only Girl Trouble member who has to this day never been photographed with Wagner) wrote, "I e'd Nick immediately upon hearing the fab news. Got one yesterday and thought it was awesome for all involved."

Shortly thereafter, I heard for a second time from Nick, whose innocently printed letter in *Wig Out!* had accidentally set all of this in motion. "Thought you might be interested in learning that awhile back the MPB was the subject of some discussion on a local Seattle radio talk show. I assume radio talk shows keep tapes/transcripts of their broadcasts and they are available to the public."

There had already been so much media coverage of the Booth that writing to ask for a tape of a media appearance of the Mojave Phone Booth would have seemed as superfluous as writing my URL on the moon. More to the point, though, it struck me that Nick didn't seem as, I don't know - excited? intrigued? marginally interested? - in all of this as I know I would have been had my random letter to a zine led to this worldwide hubbub. At the time, things were happening too fast for me to dwell much on it but, for reasons that would surface later, I have to suspect that when he saw how much attention the Booth story was attracting Nick must have at the very least blinked and swallowed hard.

I didn't think much of it at the time, though, because I was busy with plans for my next Booth visit, a visit that would turn out to be of a very different character from my first two. I was so busy, in fact, that I failed to notice that this effort I had been referring to as my Mojave Phone Booth Project had already left my control altogether.

NOTES

4 This lesson is embodied in the 1988 album *Helter Stupid*, by the sound collage group Negativland. Forced to cancel a planned tour because it seemed certain to lose money, the group decided to conduct a media virus experiment. As raw material they took a then-current news story - about a Midwestern teen who murdered his parents with an axe - and distributed a press release claiming that "Federal Official Dick Jordan" forced the tour's cancellation because Negativland's song "Christianity is Stupid" (from the 1987 album *Escape from Noise*) was suspected to have influenced the young murderer. The virus spread more effectively than the members of Negativland could have guessed. The story having penetrated one media source, it was repeated without examination in others. As the liner notes to *Helter Stupid* put it: The *Chronicle* prints an article....but gets many of the 'facts' wrong as a result of their dependence on other media stories as their only source material. It"s now abundantly clear that the major source for news is other news." Negativland's hoax was so successful that they reportedly ended up confessing in part just to stop the phone from ringing.

5 When I was in college, my Classical Greek professor - who was pretty much he Platonic Form of the ivory tower professor - remarked off-handedly that my name was the same as that of the Archbishop of Brussels. I thought maybe he was putting me on, except he didn't seem to be the put-on type, so after class I went to the university library and looked it up. Sure enough, the

Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels tuuly was named Godfried Danneels. Danneels later moved up to become His Eminence. Godfried Cardinal Danneels, and even though his realm is Belgium, observers for a time considered him a possible successor to John Paul I as pope (pope n. - a position of religious influence, one pay grade above Cardinal). Did you know there's an Italian word - *popabile* - for someone rated to have a chance at being voted the job title of Maximum Bridge Builder? Anyway. the College of Cardinals passed on the idea of a Godfried Danneels papacy, allegedly because of Danneels's outspokeness and sense of humor. Stupid Cardinals. I hope that, as a member of the College of Cardinals, Danneels at least voted for himself.

BOOTHOGRAPHY II

LOCAL REACTION

> Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder, and so when something regarded by us ordinary mortals as a decrepit and beat-up eyesore suddenly becomes an object of interest and admiration when it is viewed by an artist, it is obvious that these people see our world from an entirely different perspective.
>
> - Bob Ausms, *Eat Mojave Diary*

I suppose many people, while examining an object in a remote desert, have reflected upon the fact that they are almost certainly the only human ever to hold this particular stone, or closely inspect this individual cactus, or pee behind this specific Joshua tree.

I was not the first person to see the Mojave Phone Booth, obviously. Not counting its installers, many desert dwellers and explorers had seen it and even used its phone. I was fully aware that I had not "discovered" anything. I was no Phone Booth Magellan. I was just a guy who got fascinated by the idea of a desert phone booth. Becoming the midwife of its accidental fame was an unlooked-for side effect. Contrary to what some people would claim about me, I knew that the Mojave Phone Booth had existed for decades before I or the world at large knew about it and that it wasn't put there for the entertainment of us Internet bozos. In fact, I was intensely curious what those who regularly used the Phone Booth thought of it and how exactly the thing had come to be there in the first place.

Many articles offered authoritative answers to the second question. They tended to be no more accurate than a lot of answers one finds in articles, as anyone who's been quoted in articles quickly finds out. Here's a sample of one unfortunately representative example with my comments in brackets:

> *It was originally installed for miners who dug volcanic cinder about 15 miles away.* [False] *Eventually the cinder mine was exhausted.* [False] *The miners left* [False] *but the phone booth remained. The webmaster left a plaster bust of Richard Wagner, an influential German composer, in the booth. [Definitely* false!*] Even Tom Brokaw showed up, to do a story about the booth.* [False]

I often wished I hadn't been so stupefied on that first call with Lorene, so I'd have thought to ask for more specific information about the Booth's origins. Before I visited the Booth I didn't know whether it was near enough to Lorene's desert home for its ring to be audible from there. I had wondered whether maybe the phone she had never before heard ring was now irritating her by ringing constantly. Imagine if the fire hydrant in front of your house suddenly became world famous and started spraying water all over the place randomly, in response to people around the world clicking some stupid button on the Internet.

I now knew that no one lived near enough to hear the Booth's phone ring, except maybe under freakishly perfect wind conditions. But it was still possible that the growing Booth hubbub could somehow be an annoyance to the locals. Starting with my next visit, we'd have to wait for the phone to quit ringing long enough for us to make a few non-essential outgoing calls. To us the constant ringing was funny, but it might not be so amusing to anyone for whom this suddenly world-famous Booth held no other significance than any other utilitarian object and actually needed to use it to, y'know ... make phone calls.

Worldwide attention would alter the experience of visiting the Booth, but had it already altered the experience of living in the area for the few local residents? If I sometimes regarded certain people as interlopers in my desert, how might I seem to people in this desert who'd used the Booth for years and never given it a thought? They had reasonable grounds to consider me an interloper. Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* had recently come out and I wondered whether the locals might not think of me and their old phone booth as many Alaskans thought of Chris McCandless and people who came to visit that old bus in which he needlessly perished.

It wasn't until two years after I had initiated the Mojave Phone Booth Project that I began to hear from people who lived in the area or had lived in the area in the past.

> From: Lynn M.
> Hi, Godfrey
>
> I was with Lorene the day you called. We had been making some business calls, as it is less to call from the booth than a cell phone. We were as surprised as you when the phone rang.
>
> The booth was moved to its current location sometime in the early 60s. Before that, it was at

the Y at the Aiken Rd and the road to Cima Cinder Mine.

My husband and I have been friends of Terry and Lorene for years, and have spent a lot of time at that mine, and have used the phone booth dozens of times. Never did it ring until that fateful day. Lorene and I have had as much fun with all of this as you have had with it.

Next time you are in the area of the Mojave Phone Booth, stop and say hello to Lorene.

From: Elizabeth T.
Hi Godfrey!

I couldn't hold back any longer letting you know a few interesting things that you may not have heard already.

First, we have been good friends with that booth since 1972. My husband ran Cima Cinders for several different owners (really, leasers) off and on for many years. He also worked for Aiken a long time.

I didn't move to the desert until 1981, but he was up there long before me. We moved down to the city a year and 1/2 ago with health problems. But my husband goes back up there every couple of weeks. Charlie told him about you (you must know Charlie from the Cow Camp). He is the one who helps folks when they get stuck or break down out there.

At one time it was a crank phone and the # was Cinder Peak #1. Down at Stuckey's and the house next door it was called Windmill Station #1 and #2. We lived at the mines there and we had to haul water 13 miles from Cima rd. out there. No electricity either.

I know the lady you talked to on the phone out there. I just wish her Dad Emerson was alive, he could really tell you stories.

I just hope the Booth doesn't get completely destroyed with so many going out there now. Maybe you will have to hire Charlie to guard it. LOL

From: Nanete Y.
Hello Godfrey

Your website on the Mojave Phone Booth is a hoot! My husband and I manage the store at Interstate 15 and Cima Road. My husband has been friends with Charlie Wilcox and Lorene (your first contact) for years. We had no idea that the booth was attracting such interest until an article in the LV Review-Journal appeared August 1, 1999.

Please stop at the store to say hello the next time you get out our way - meet some of the other locals.

Did you meet Lorene yet? They stop by every now and then at the store.

Charlie and Rena have been in this area forever!! The people out here are certainly a breed of their own!

Hope we're here next time you stop in!!!

I love that sentence of Lynn's, "Never did it ring until that fateful day" and was happy to learn that the locals I was hearing from were not annoyed by the Booth's new fame but rather were enjoying it.

SPAWNING A SCARY TRIBE

You're spawning a scary tribe here!
-Ponyboy Girlie Toolshed

During the course of my government school incarceration, my fellow inmates and I were periodically forced to submit to "career aptitude assessment" tests. My test results were usually inconclusive except concerning my prospects in the exciting and expanding field of Cult Leadership. Only by implication, of course, but it is true that over the years many people have felt alarmingly comfortable off-handedly remarking to me, "You know, you'd make a good cult leader."

Draw a smiley face on that however you like, it's still a hell of a thing to hear about oneself. It'd be bad enough if I had heard it from only one person, especially someone who didn't know me well. But I've heard some version of it again and again, often from those who know me best. I was hearing it long before I ever got into the habit of luring people to a faraway desert to hang around at a Phone Booth. I guess some people know aptitude when they see it.

To be honest, a cult did seem to be forming around the Mojave Phone Booth and though I like to think of myself as the shy, retiring, hermit type, I do recognize the value of forcing myself to get out and meet people. This I planned to do once again by driving *Whip It!* back to the Booth.

Nope. You did not misread that. In the face of common sense, horse sense, and the prospect of a summertime drive from Arizona to the Booth - hundreds of desert miles and a number of serious desert mountain summits, in blistering August heat - and even after *Whip It!'s* already impressively depressing multi-

state string of breakdowns, I somehow still saw it as a dandy idea to drive a recently repaired, and re-re-re-(&c.)-repaired, three-and-a-half-decade-old vintage automobile once more into the bleak.

Here in the Sonoran Desert there lives a toad that secretes a venom so toxic to dogs that it can even kill them. Curiously, dogs who survive will often go right back to the spot of their near-fatal encounter, as if addicted. The Mojave Phone Booth was my desert toad.

Furthermore, I was upping the ante on this trip. Trying to get *Whip It!* back to the scene of its first breakdown was to be only a prelude to trying to drive it all the way to northwestern Nevada's Black Rock Desert to make an appearance at Burning Man, after which I was depending on this demonstrably super· unreliable automobile to get rue across the Sierra Nevada mountain range to San Francisco for Art Car Fest a few weeks later, and then all the way back to my driveway in Tempe.

This terrible plan of mine - "fraught with peril," my friend Elegant Fingers would have called it, echoing my patron saint, Uncle Claude - probably said something about me that I wasn't willing to say about myself. By contrast, my mechanic was willing, able, and full of beers, so he had plenty to say about me, none of which is suitable for repetition here. Mostly he was afraid of receiving desperate phone calls from various points along my route. And that, he repeatedly emphasized, would be the *best-case* scenario.

It might not have been the most advisable plan I ever made in my life, but no one can say I lack the courage of my afflictions. A phrenologist might say my foresight bump lacks prominence. I say doing the ill-advised thing is just part of aspiring to join the crazy cult leader community.

An even more important part is recruiting skill. In this effort up-and-coming cult leaders can't let themselves be hampered by convention. Accordingly, with justifications only cult leaders and spammers will understand, I set about proselytizing my personal email contact list using the following sales script:

Date: Monday, July 13, 1998
Subject: A Gathering at The Mojave Phone Booth: 27-28 August 1998

Join Us!
ON ANOTHER WILD-ASS ADVENTURE

Going to Burning Man? Not going to Burning Man? Doesn't matter - you can still join the Mojave Phone Booth Desert Caravan. Join when you like, leave when you like, or stay on board for the whole thing.

We'll be calling friends, making prank calls, talking live to at least one radio station, &c., &c., &c. Once we finish - if we do - we'll crash for the night beside the Booth.

From there, we head for the opera house in Death Valley, Scotty's Castle, Devil's Golf Course, Furnace Creek Bad Water, and the Clown Motel.

If you can't come along, you can try calling The Booth (760.733.9969) anytime after about 2

or 3pm on Aug 27.. if you can get through.....

The reason I added the *if you can get through* part was because the crush of media attention had caused the Booth dynamic to undergo an astonishingly rapid transformation. The change had manifested itself while I was still making preparations for this third visit to the Booth. Following my established custom, I was still calling at least once a day and usually more, but now sometimes the line would be busy, just as it had been the day I'd telephonically stumbled across one of Lorene's routine calling stops at the Booth, except now when I kept dialing and eventually got a ring, no one answered.

At first it puzzled me - how could someone make a call from an isolated telephone booth, hang up hear its ringing and not be curious enough to pick up the receiver to see who would be calling? Then I realized that the line was busy not because anyone was at the Booth using its phone but because I was no longer the only one dialing its number. As the story ran through media outlets, the Mojave Phone Booth's user base had grown dramatically. Remember a few chapters ago, when I mentioned *folie à deux*? The Booth's new desert madness had now become a *folie à plusieurs* - a madness of many.

When I was the only person dialing this remote desert phone booth. I was doing it just to be dialing a remote desert phone booth, with little chance, or so I believed, of ever getting an answer. After I put up the website, a handful of my fellow goofballs began filling the odd idle moment during the day by doing the same thing. Now, with media attention stirred up right before our upcoming visit, people around the world had begun dialing the Booth's number. With the dates of our upcoming visit posted on the Booth's website, anyone within reach of a phone would be able to dial the Booth's number and, for the first time, know that their call would be answered for certain (*Whip It!* allowing, that is).

I'd had a mere two visits to the Booth, wildly different from one another, yet it felt almost as if I had a Booth visit routine. Failing to arrive at the Booth in the daylight was part of that routine I was aiming to break. A huge change was that this time there would be incoming calls, from strangers potentially anywhere in the world! I made sure to bring my cassette tape recorder and suction cup microphone to document this new development in the project.

Charles Fort wrote, "A tree can not find out, as it were, how to blossom, until comes blossom-time. A social growth cannot find out the use of steam engines, until comes steam-engine-time." Apparently now in the history of the planet had come Mojave-Phone-Booth-time.

A novice cult leader can't afford to scruple over cross-recruiting from other cults. I figured my most promising recruiting pool was the cult with which I was already involved. Accordingly, my Booth Gathering

announcement appeared in *The Jackrabbit Speaks*, official email organ of Burning Man. As long as strangers would be phoning the Booth, at least some of those strangers might as well be *really* strange.

I meant to recruit just for the sake of recruiting, sure, but my underlying hope was, as always, to raise a caravan. *Whip It!* welcomed any company at all, any sort of ad hoc pit crew who might mitigate the perils of driving a laughably shaky car. I was hoping I could maybe drive *Whip It!* only as far as the Cima exit, which would not only save some *Whip It!* wear and tear but also enable me to follow through on another ill-advised plan - never enough ill-advised plans, I always say - to ride my *Whipped Cream & Other Delights* tall bike the 12.5 miles from the Cima exit to the Booth in the scalding August sun. Failing a caravan, I would at least need someone nutty enough to be willing to drive *Whip It!* to the Booth as my pace car as I pedaled along.

It should tell you something about my state of mind in those days that I was genuinely surprised I wasn't instantly swamped with takers. It was almost as if the general public could read detailed accounts of *Whip It!'s* many automotive disasters right on a publicly accessible website or something.

I'm sure Ponyboy and Daniel would have been up for the trip, had they not been forced to email their regrets for reasons they neglected to make clear. Daniel wrote, "Promise me you'll try to make it into Amboy. There is someone there who should be at Burning Man."

Reporting for duty in their place - whether despite or because of the potential for a military-caliber disaster and a more than reasonable possibility of casualties - was a Marine named Burford. Yes, this was the same Burford who had towed *Whip It!* to Texas. This time he would be escorting rather than towing, and not with a van but with an old RV he managed to borrow from his brother-in-law.

Even someone who ignores forebodings as diligently as I do should have recognized this dark omen. Had I not bought *Whip It!* from a brother-in-law? And was it not Burford who had played a six-foot five-inch Elf alongside my Santa of ordinary size during my ill-fated 1995 attempt to drive Professor Cardyhouse's unlucky Lucky car with the sawed-off roof from Illinois to Arizona on Route 66?

Eh, well. Sometimes a dark omen is just a cigar.

Somehow, the Great Lucky Debacle had not dampened Burford's willingness to come along on yet another ill-advised road trip. According to classified government documents uncovered by whistle-blowers military training can sometimes render its victims insensible to pointlessness as well as accustom them to repeated failure. When it comes to pointlessness and repeated failure, I'll match my track record to any government agency on Earth.

Another omen of unknown import came in the form of an email from a total stranger who expressed a strong interest in coming along on what he referred to as "this hairbrained caravan thingy." Well, at least the poor guy was walking into it with his eyes open. The unknown import part consisted of the stranger's name: Krishna.

People sometimes ask me questions along the lines of, "These friends of yours - 'Professor Cardyhouse,' 'Ponyboy Girlie Toolshed,' and so forth - are these real people?" Don't think I haven't asked myself that question from time to time. However, I'd had no practice at knowing what to expect from anyone named Krishna. Questions arose. Hindu? Hippie? More importantly, do Hindus proselytize? I've known a lot of hippies who do. I felt there was room on this caravan for only one budding cult leader. My only recourse would be that of primal nature itself, fight or flight. if it turned out Krishna had a HONK IF YOU ♥ THE DESTROYER bumper sticker or an I'M NOT PERFECT. JUST REINCARNATED T-shirt.

An important fact heavily weighted the case for a non-Hindu, non-hippie Krishna. It turned out he had read about the Mojave Phone Booth after initially coming to Deuce of Clubs to read an interview I'd conducted with one of his favorite bands, San Diego's Deadbolt (motto: "The Scariest Band in the World"). Krishna was a regular on Deadbolt's web bulletin board, where he posted under the religious sounding screen name *Blue Monk*. Would a devout Hindu go in for voodoobilly? Okay, maybe, but also Catholicism? We'd just have to find out. Either way, Krishna was making plans, alternate plans, and backup plans.

> Lastly, and this is the nutty, kooky, crazy one: Fly down to LA (or Phoenix ... maybe), BUY a cheap, cheap used car and drive that, getting rid of it after everything's all done and finished. Reading up on Whipped Cream sorta puts me in the mind to be prepared for many hazards if I go this route. It's complex is what it is. Fingers crossed on it all.

Having once considered the same plan myself, I therefore knew it couldn't be a wise one. Krishna agreed. "The buying a car plan has not panned out and been thrown to the wolves," he wrote. "You're absolutely right: any car cheap enough for me to justify buying for a mere week's use can't possibly inspire the confidence in its ability to make the trek." Krishna was already proving himself wiser than the guy whose current plan included driving *Whip It!* several thousand miles through three different deserts. Krishna ended up borrowing a small van from his parents. Sounded good to me. I mean, omen-wise, at least it wasn't a brother-in-law.

Onward and Boothwa- ... Oh, Crap

> Own a piece of junk so that others will volunteer to drive.
> - Whitewater Kayaker's Little Book of Wisdom (#180)

Trouble began even before I left town. Remember that palm tree next to my house that was struck by lightning and burned to ashes right before my first Booth trip? Well, the day before my trip was to commence, a decree arrived from city bureaucrats demanding I cut down the tree or else be forced to hand them cash (and then cut down the tree anyway). About to leave town, I asked for an extension concerning this order regarding an object on what we once quaintly referred to as private property, but somehow the same bureaucracy that hadn't thought my palm tree dangerous enough to swing by and squirt some water on when it was in flames now regarded its trunk, minus its palms and *not* in flames, to be far too dangerous to stand solidly in place for a couple of weeks until I returned from Burning Man. I had planned to cut the palm down myself and carve its trunk into tiki heads. Now, on top of all my other mp preparations, plus 9-to-5 employment, I had to scramble to find someone who'd cut down a tree on short notice. Turned out it'd be $250 to cut it down and haul it away, but no one listed in the Yellow Pages could do it any sooner than 4-6 weeks. Legal coercion forced me to turn to "illegal" laborers whom I had no chance but to pay 1n advance and trust they'd do the work in my absence. When I returned after the trip, the tree was gone and all was cleaned up nicely. (Maybe we should swap our definitions of *legal* and *illegal*.)

I didn't take the mini-ordeal as a fire omen, at least until a sudden automotive fire interrupted our Booth expedition the very next day mere hours out of Phoenix. It wasn't exactly a surprise. It was actually more of a shock, because it wasn't *Whip It!* that stranded us on the side of California Route 95 but instead our RV escort, bravely supporting our Mojave invasion in much the same fashion that U.S. air power supported Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, namely, with a polite cough and a hasty *"¡buena suerte!"* One minute I'm cruising along a desert blacktop without a care, next minute I'm frantically flashing my headlights and honking and waving to try to draw Burford's attention to the billows of smoke pouring from the RV. By he time he finally noticed it and pulled over, flames were emanating from the undercarriage.

Luckily for Burford and his brother-in-law, *Whip It!* wasn't the only hunk o' junk I'd ever owned. An old VW Bug I used to have caught fire one day and if I'd had a fire extinguisher it'd have been in the luggage compartment, which was where the fire was burning. Since then I've never traveled without at least three fire extinguishers in good working order, one under the front seat, one under the back seat, and one in the trunk. Up until that day I'd never operated a fire extinguisher in a non-prank situation. It was nice to discover that not only are fire extinguishers perfect for pranks but they're also fairly well suited for extinguishing fires.

Two of *Whip It!'s* breakdowns during my three-part escape attempt from Needles had occurred on California Route 95, so it was an added fun little kick in the teeth to be marooned there yet again. We were pointed in the opposite direction this time, at least, which broke up the monotony some as

we poked around to see what was the RVs problem. I couldn't help remembering how the EM-50 Urban Assault Vehicle in *Stripes* managed to get Bill Murray and crew safely behind the Iron Curtain and back while sustaining heavy enemy fire, whereas this RV was somehow unable to meet the challenge of the gently rolling hills of Route 95.

I doubt even the EM-50 Urban Assault Vehicle could have run without oil, though. It turned out that the sensor line running to the RV's oil pressure gauge had disengaged from the engine block, causing the engine to spew most of its oil behind it, leaving a long oil slick inauspiciously similar in appearance to the one left by the roofless Lucky the Art Car along a former stretch of Route 66 called "the Death Curve" when I road-tripped with Burford in 1995.

Speaking of Lucky, there was a second sense in which Burford and his brother-in-law were lucky on this trip. Just as my VW had taught me the value of a fire extinguisher, Lucky had taught me the value of never again getting stuck alongside the road by a car that has dumped every drop of its oil. I kept *Whip It!* stocked at all times with a full complement of oil. Strand me twice, shame on me!

Had I previously ever driven an RV that broke down, I'd have been carrying spare RV parts that day. The ancient Roman poet Horace wrote something about it being delightful to be silly at the proper moment. What would have delighted me silly at that moment would have been a threaded cap nut of such a size that we could seal the threaded nib on the engine block. Without it, any oil we put into the engine was just going to start spurting right back out as soon as we fired up the engine again, and I didn't have but two more fire extinguishers.

We looked to be facing an RV tow of high expense in both dollars and time until we took a second rummage through my mess of a toolbox and found a peculiar screwdriver. One of the few perks of having for a time worked at my friend Gordon's parents' auto parts store is that my toolbox ended up with a variety of 88-cent point-of-sale tools. The screwdriver was one of those cheap jobbies whose metal handle twists off to reveal another screwdriver inside and then another screwdriver inside of that, like the screwdriver version of a Russian nesting doll.

Amazingly, the threads of this 88-cent screwdriver screwed onto the block nub perfectly. We were saved! Or would have been, if an 88-cent sale price were enough to for them to have been engineered to withstand the torque required to secure their threaded handles snugly on an engine block nib. The metal that composed the screwdriver handle was not marked as "DROP FORGED," which must be the process that keeps small metal tools from cracking apart when you try to screw them onto RV engine block nibs.

Burford eventually got the idea to look elsewhere on the RV itself for a matching cap nut. Never before or since have I believed in homeopathic solutions, but this time it worked - he found one and it fit well enough. From

Whip It!'s trunk I pulled out all the oil I had and the RV was able to limp into Needles. Our repair didn't necessarily rival that of the Apollo 13 mission, but we were pretty happy with it.

I had planned to stop by the Needles garage in which *Whip It!* had been marooned on the previous trip because upon returning to Arizona after my three-day sojourn, I discovered that the Needles mechanics had left a couple of definitely-more-than-88-cent tools inside Whip It!'s roomy engine compartment. Instead we stopped by the garage for the more usual reason, They were closed by the time we got there, so Burford left a note with the RV explaining the problem and that he'd be calling them in the morning from the world-famous Mojave Phone Booth. That must have been a strange note for a mechanic to find.

The support vehicle's breakdown would be expensive for *Whip It!* in terms of added wear and tear to her delicate constitution. Instead of waiting at the Cima gas station while we took the RV to the Booth, the poor old sedan would now have to travel about 90 miles from Needles out to the Booth, then backtrack that same 90 miles to Needles to pick up the RV before turning around and heading northward to Burning Man. That's a lot of extra hard, hot, desert miles for a 36-year-old car that had already made abundantly clear its disinclination to travel reliably through deserts.

The RV breakdown was expensive also in terms of sunlight, working against my persistent obsession to arrive at the Booth before the sun went down, Plus it scotched both my planned Mojave Desert bicycle ride and our making the agreed-upon afternoon rendezvous with Krishna. Unless Krishna happened to be driving a piece of crap car covered in record albums or a borrowed RV suffering from oil incontinence, he would likely have reached the Booth already and would now be wondering where we were and whether maybe I hadn't tricked him out into the desert as a prank.

I was glad Krishna was a Deuce of Clubs reader. He couldn't know for sure why we were delayed, but he could doubtless make a pretty good guess, as long as he guessed *Whip It!* I just hoped he wasn't one of those people who freaks out at delays or plan changes, especially since he was out in the Mojave Desert all by himself and would be for another few hours, even if *Whip It!* managed to make it to the Booth without incident. Being alone in the desert at night can frighten a person. While gassing up *Whip It!* I began to worry a little about that. I actually found myself saying - out loud, unfortunately - "Damn, I wish there were a way I could get a message to the poor guy, waiting all by himself way out in the desert -"

Ba-DOING!

" - next to a phone booth."

At the gas station's payphone I tapped in my phone calling card number, which I had not committed to memory, and then the telephone number now so much more familiar to me than my own home phone number that I could have dialed it in my sleep (and who knows, I probably had). I thought I might not

be able to get through, thanks to worldwide publicity in the weeks before the trip, but after a few tries I heard a ring tone and then a cheerful voice saying, "Mojave Phone Booth, here." Krishna sounded surprised but also relieved to hear from me. I asked whether he'd heard from anyone who'd said they would be joining us. Nope. Krishna was alone.

At the same time, he wasn't alone. He said he was talking to people and media representatives from all over the place. Beforehand, he'd asked me for Phone Booth suggestions or instructions. I'd been more concerned about desert survival tips, so all I had told him about the Booth was: I really have only one suggestion for you: If the phone rings, answer it." Krishna seemed to have that covered.

Whip It! was going to have to go into the desert solo this time, but least now I knew that if *Whip It!* broke down at or near the Booth, Krishna's vehicle was there to serve as backup, as *Whip It!* was now doing for the RV.

And for the third Booth trip in a row, the sun went down before I could get anywhere near the Booth.

Thankfully, at least *Whip It!* hummed along for hours through the desert night without a hiccup, without a hesitation, and without that horrible chuffing sound, even when bouncing along that final dusty, punishing, cheese grater of a surface masquerading as a road. At 10:45 p.m., *Whip It's* headlamps once again shone on the welcoming incongruity of a desert telephone booth. But this time the Booth was not unaccompanied.

Meeting in the middle of the desert always made me nervous. It's a scary place.

- Sam "Ace" Rothstein, *Casino*

Ach! Jesus! It's always a desert"

- Saul Goodman, *Breaking Bad*

In the light of the headlamps we saw a man huddled beside the Booth beneath a pile of blankets, like a poisonous snake, or a Hindu god, or a mild-mannered employee of an antiquarian bookstore. Lucky for us, Krishna turned out to be that third thing.

"I was sleeping right next to the phone," Krishna recalls. "So I'd be there." Being there. Check. "Very comfy in my serape and my sleeping bag." Not completely comfortable, though. "The burros were freaky. You hear 'em in the distance and you're out in the desert - there's a weird distance thing. Is that a mile off? Is it 52 yards away? I don't know."

Krishna's worries concerned not only the local wild jackasses but also the wild Jackass piloting an album-covered car in his direction. "While I was waiting, I had a lot of time to wonder. *Who is this guy? He could be* anything. *All the details that make him sound like he's harmless, he could have made*

up! He could be some guy who stays in some one-room shack, and one in a while goes out and kills people! Who knows? I was a little trepidatious when you guys showed up, headlights right on my sleeping bag. *Who are these dark figures in the night in this completely remote location? They could totally stab me and I'm dead.* Quickly dispelled, obviously. You've got a sense of humor, and aren't a homicidal killer - are you?"

Krishna scoffs when I remind him he wasn't the only one who was worried. "That's kind of a *parody* of being worried," he says. "You were worried I was going to be a *hippie*. I was worried you were going to be a *killer*" Krishna turned out to be reasonably normal for a guy who sometimes gives the impression of being from Mars. He seemed less like a Hindu god than, I don't know, a shifty leprechaun? Or maybe a Martian leprechaun? After we got to Burning Man, our friend Max started calling him Elfin Magic Boy. Whatever Max was drinking, she was on to something, and the name stuck. Elfin Magic Boy has a little of that quality Harpo Marx's contemporaries noticed in him: an air of innocence without necessarily being innocent, along with a pleasant demeanor reminiscent of Happy Kyne. His grin, along with the shape of his face, suggested to me a carefree cartoon bear, or a carefree cartoon bear with fabulous taste in music, which is I guess what we attribute to someone when their tastes in certain respects parallel our own. If not for one of those parallels, in the form of the band Deadbolt, Krishna would not have ended up all alone in a telephone booth in the middle of the desert.

I asked Krishna his impressions of his drive into the Mojave Desert.

"Um, *wow*, it's *hot*," is the first thing he remembers. He says he was mostly wrapped up in "just figuring out the logistics of getting there. And it's a long-ass road, so you're like, *All right ... I'm gonna turn around in five minutes!* And after five minutes, you keep going. The road's kind of rocky, so I worried about if a tire goes, what the hell am I gonna do with that, 'cos, it's just me, and it was my parents' van, so I didn't want to screw it up too much. Then I noticed the various landmarks you described and finally the telephone poles. It was mid-day, like one or two, because I took off from LA pretty early in the morning and really made tracks."

And?

"I got to the Booth."

And?

"And I went: *There. That's the Booth*."

That's it?

"There's no neon sign, but, uh ... it's a phone booth."

Let none doubt the perceptive powers of Elfin Magic Boy.

"I was all by myself. I was expecting you at such a time, and you didn't show up. I wasn't worried wolves would kill me or anything like that It was just like, hrm, I'm kind of stuck here. I can't go anywhere because I'm meeting you."

There was nothing for it but to answer the phone. Or so one would think, but Krishna took it a level further. When he stepped into the Booth, he found a note that said, "Mr. Daniels: Thanks for all the publicity you gave this phone. We won $1,000." Turns out a Denver radio station. after interviewing me on the air, had offered $1,000 to the first of their listeners to go to the Booth and call in to the station from it. The winners were the first on what would become a sizeable list of people who would derive tangible gain from the Mojave Phone Booth. (Maybe this book will finally add me to that list!)

Krishna jumped onto that list with abandon. The radio interviews I'd been doing in the days leading up to the trip had resulted in a steady stream of calls to the Booth, many of them from radio DJs. Calling upon his mystic Elfin Magic Boy powers, Krishna passed the time by panhandling over the telephone, asking something of every caller. If it was a radio station. Krishna asked for free CDs. Otherwise he would just say, "Hey, send me something" and give them his home mailing address.

A little while longer alone with the Booth and Krishna probably would have forgotten he was meeting anyone out there at all.

"Some radio station called and one of their listeners got a prize, and I asked, 'Well, do I get a prize, too?' I think they sent me a cheap-ass radio that I don't have any more."

Nowadays Krishna plays it off, saying, "Sometimes I was joking, sometimes not. If I asked for something from an individual person, it was *all in jest*."

Booth Party

On the first two trips the Booth phone had been silent During the first visit, I'd had to page my friend Audra so I could hear the Booth's phone bell ring.

That was not necessary this time. The Booth's phone bell rang steadily, though not yet non-stop. And instead of talking only to people we already knew, we now had no idea who would be on the other end of the line when we answered or from where they would be phoning. We took calls for hours, from South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Albania, Romania, Ptomania, Vulnavia, what have ya. I had anticipated *some* response, but this was more than I could have guessed. Callers worldwide were now making a lie of my IF YOU HEAR THIS PHONE RINGING, PICK IT UP: IT'S ME graffito. It was weird to think that only a few weeks previous I had been the only person in the world calling the Booth's number. Now it could be anyone on the line when you picked up the Booth's phone. It could be strangers (it usually was). It could be friends of mine (it sometimes was). It could be Cher (as later, for one Booth visitor, it would be). It could be Ute Lemper (it never was, but it *could* have been).

I was again imitating a prepared person and had thought to bring along amplification and recording equipment so that the calls could be heard by everyone present and also recorded for all time so that we (and future historians wondering where civilization went wrong) could hear such important conversational nuggets as:

Krishna: Were you making the cake with the boob? The Ass Cake?
Minty Jane, cake maker: The Ass Cake is tomorrow night. My friend wanted a Liam Gallagher with butterflies, so instead she's getting a butterfly cake with Liam Gallagher's head.

Minty Jane later emailed me a photo of her "Liam Gallagher with Butterflies" cake. It was sort of a culinary version of Jeffrey Vallance's painting "Sam Yorty with Moths," which you should make a point of looking up and marveling at sometime.

Radio personality: What are you, celebrating something, uh, with this Phone Booth in the Mojave Desert, or what?
Me: Yes.
Radio personality: What are you celebrating?
Me: We are celebrating just being here.

I wish I'd thought to answer with Brando's line from *The Wild One*: "Whaddya got?" Lots of radio stations called, which meant lots of often inane banter. And of course Krishna carried on with his Krishna-thon.

Radio DJ: Well, thanks for answering the phone.
Krishna: All right. Do I get anything?
DJ: Do you get anything?
Krishna: Yeah.
DJ: Uhhh... sure, why not? Hold on the line there for me, okay?
Krishna: Okay. [*Howls of laughter in the background from me and Burford*]
DJ: Okay. Give me your address. I'll send ya somethin'. I don't know what I'll send ya. I'll send ya a couple of beach balls.
Krishna: All right Thanks.

It was nice to hear from quite a few pals, including Ponyboy, who called to enjoy her traditional laugh at my expense regarding my continued failure to arrive at the Booth in the daylight. We talked to so many people that I began to wonder whether I had brought enough cassette tapes to last through the night. We definitely kept ourselves amused, talking on the phone and among ourselves, far into the night. But it doesn't take all that many hours of driving a car with no air conditioning, being stranded roadside in the hot desert sun, and answering international phone calls before a body'll just get plum tuckered. And it was only, what, 3 a.m. or something. I know, lightweights! The Booth phone, on the other hand, was tireless. Because people were calling from time zones around the world, it never got a rest.

In not nearly enough hours we would be faced with backtracking 90 miles to Needles to pick up what we hoped would be a repaired RV before we could then turn around and head north again toward our next night's stopping point,

the Clown Motel in Tonopah, Nevada. A ringing phone gathers no sleep, so at the conclusion of an interview with a Pittsburgh radio station we were finally forced to take the Booth's phone off the hook so we could get a little bit of rest (Sorry, world.)

Because Sleeping Plan A - lodging comfortably in an RV beside the Mojave Phone Booth - had depended upon an RV not ditching out on its duty, we were forced to resort to Sleeping Plan B, which consisted of throwing down blankets and conking on the desert floor beside the Mojave Phone Booth. Chatting on the Booth phone earlier in the day, Krishna had received a friendly warning from Karen, an entomologist friend I knew from art car caravans and Burning Man. "I remember talking to one of your friends on the phone, a lady, someone who knew about desert stuff, and I was asking about possible problems in the desert, dangerous spiders and such. She said the only thing you really have to worry about is the brown recluse spider." I told Krishna there was no reason to worry, that there's a reason they're called *recluses*. (Except then I thought, well, wait, *I'm* reclusive and *I'm* out here.)

We were so beat we could probably have collapsed into happy slumbers on a bed of lava rocks and hissing cockroaches, now that the ringing in our ears had stopped. With very little preliminary chit-chat, we were all asleep in short order.

At about six in the morning I awoke in the traditional desert mode, which is to say, covered with crawling, biting ants. Somehow the others awoke antless. I pulled aside my blanket and discovered that although I had clearly requested a private bedroll, it turned out I had shared my night's accommodations with a scorpion. Luckily, the scorpion appeared to be a later sleeper than I, or maybe it just hadn't yet thawed out. It had only been trying to stay warm through the chilly desert night, same as I had been.

Entomological matters were forgotten when I looked up to see beside me a Phone Booth standing in the morning light, just asking for trouble. And there I was, standing in the morning light, just itching to supply some.

First, more photos. Never enough Booth photos. If I'd had a digital camera

in 1998, I'd have taken thousands. For once, however, Wagner wasn't with me. On this trip, I was the disciple of Fake Wagner, Wagner's body double. Real Wagner was on the final leg of being photographed on a cross-country trip with Dr. Cliff, Evil Dentist, whom you'll meet a few chapters from now, and with whom we were to rendezvous at Burning Man.

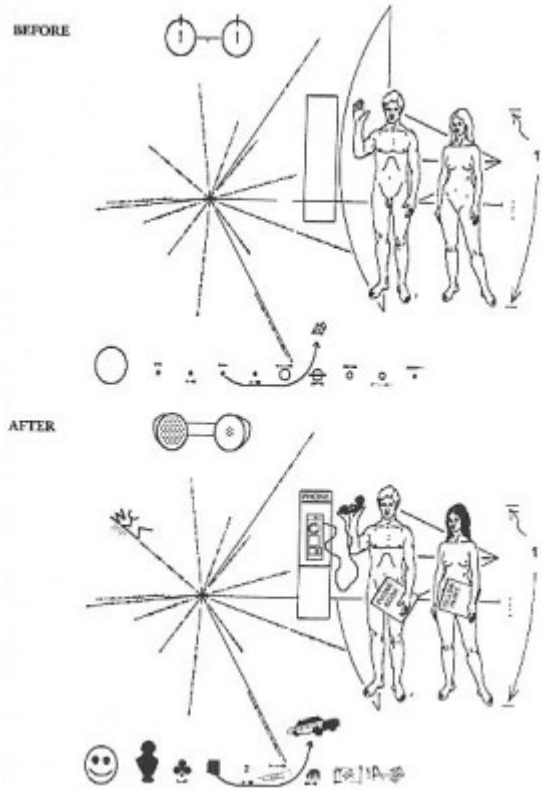
Not that one needed a statue to have a reason for snapping photos at the Mojave Phone Booth. I was happy to take photos of the Booth's brand new phone book, placed by the phone book Gideons or whoever takes care of that stuff. In this sparsely populated place the phone book had 161 pages, a whopping 8 pages of which were actual phone listings, the rest being various forms of advertising.

I was about to do some advertising of my own. I had brought along a piece of aluminum diamond plate and a stamp kit I had borrowed from my sceptical mechanic so I could make a plaque for the Booth. After hammering like a Nibelung for about 20 minutes, I ended up with the following message:

ON THIS SPOT MEN FROM WWW. CARDHOUSE.COM
SET FOOT INSIDE
THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH
AUGUST NINETY-EIGHT
WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND

Back then, it was still advisable to include the *www* when referring to websites, it having only just before that stopped being necessary to include the *http://* (although *http://*does appear in this book's footnotes, per the *Chicago Manual of Style*). I used some of the silicone left over from covering *Whip It!'s* roof with vinyl records to affix the plaque in the place at the top of the Booth where once there would have been a glass pane identifying the phone company. (Indeed, the Booth's fame soon became such that the suits at Pacific Bell decided that as long as the Booth was in the world spotlight, it ought to be advertising the approved corporate identity, not the nutty website that made the Booth famous, so they sent workers out to install new panes of phone booth glass emblazoned with the words PACIFIC BELL.) [1]

Next, in keeping with the space exploration theme, I used engine hose bandage - by the way, good engine hose bandage is *magical* - to mount inside the Booth an explanatory image based on the Pioneer 10 plaque, should any marooned aliens wander by and wonder why there was a telephone booth in the middle of the desert.



Legend for those who aren't outer space aliens (bottom, left to right); smiley, Wagner silhouette, club symbol, Arizona, 2 (for Deuce), Herb Alpert's trumpet, Whip It! (floating like Repo Man's Chevy Malibu), Tony the riderless horse (from the Tom Mix Memorial Rest Stop). Ama Gi (cuneiform signs representing the earliest known occurrence of a written expression of the idea freedom). The W symbol at the upper left represents Wagnergnügen (a play on a then popular Volkswagen advertising symbol that supposedly stood for fahrvergnügen, "driving pleasure.") Wagnergnügen was also the title of one of Wagner's 1996 PXL 2000 videos, chronicling the doomed Lucky Car cross-country Santa trip. In 2009, my friend Kenny Irwin, artist and professional microwave operator, summarized the message of this illustration: "ET phone home and please abduct me with my car from the mountains of southeast Arizona so you can take me to your planet in your four-legged space craft with all trumpets blaring to escape all the madness of this planet. I will be smiling all the way and feeling lucky as I listen to my favorite composer of symphonic music." Kenny Irwin is a genius.

During all these activities, the Booth phone continued to ring. Krishna and Burford handled most of the calls, but I did stop to take a few, including the first of what would be a much-repeated joke:

Caller: Yeah, I'd like to order a pizza.
Me: You know, we were just saying, "How come nobody's prank called us?"
Caller: You guys deliver?
Me: You bet. Where are you?
Caller: Michigan.
Me: All right. It'll be there in a half-hour, or it's free.

I also enjoyed the occasional calls from bill collectors, whose quarries had provided in their contact information the Booth's number in place of their

own.

Before this visit I had been trying to figure out a way to hook the Booth up with some sort of messaging system, but I didn't come up with anything that would be safe against the elements, particularly the human element. An actual answering machine would need a power supply. Out where the Booth was, that meant a solar collector and battery setup, which meant the equipment would have value, which meant it would have all been stolen anyway. Voice mail was out of the question, at least according to Pacific Bell when I asked them. They clung to the quaint notion that one had to own a phone number to put voice mail on it. Pfft! That might have been a reasonable policy under ordinary circumstances, but my position was that the Mojave Phone Booth was nothing if not out of the ordinary.

I don't know why I hadn't thought to do it on my previous trips, but this time I remembered to call my home phone number from the Booth so that when I got home I could see how the Booth's number looked on the Caller ID display (in those days, Caller ID was a separate, battery-powered box *stop laughing*). Then I called the Needles garage to check on the RV. I asked for Dennis or Dean, but they said Dennis no longer worked at West Point and Dean worked mostly in Lake Havasu. Life moves fast in Needles, California. I told the mechanic we were wondering when we could come by. He said, "You can come any time you like." Great!" I said. "It'll be a couple hours before I can get to the motor home, though," it then occurred to him to add, reminding me of the old yokel joke where the city slicker asks the local, "Have you lived here all your life?" and the local says, "Not yet." As a former gas station employee, I have a limited tolerance for the home-spun god-damned laconicism of mechanics, so I handed the phone over to Burford to get the details. Meanwhile, I deployed various totems into a nearby hole and marked the spot with some of that white decorative rock that had been brought out to the desert and dumped by parties unknown.

The day was heating up fast. As always, I'd have preferred to spend a whole lot more time with the Booth, but we had a long day's traveling ahead of us. It was a little tougher to leave this time, and each succeeding trip after this one, because there was now no way to leave the Booth in silence. In order to leave, you were going to have to do something that went against the grain for people brought up in the days of land-line telephones: you were going to have to walk away from a ringing telephone.

We headed back to Needles to pick up the RV or else try to prod the mechanics along, Krishna now following *Whip It!* in his borrowed Chevy Astro. I don't remember much about that part of the trip, which must mean *Whip It!* didn't break down and there were no other desert phone booths of note along the way. Krishna remembers that "the mechanic was a dead ringer for Russell Crowe. He was an ex-convict and didn't want you to take a picture of him." All I remember is being pleased to find that the Needles mechanics had cleared the RV for takeoff. [2]

Take off we did, our caravan now with three putatively roadworthy vehicles, until *Whip It!* broke down for the first of what would be dozens of times between Needles and Burning Man and then Burning Man to Chez Brody, a pal's house in Oakland where *Whip It!* would garage until Art Car Fest a month or so later (to which - naturally - *Whip It!* ended up having to be towed).

Once back home, the first thing I did after walking in the front door was rush over to check my Caller ID box. There it was, my call home from the Mojave Phone Booth. UNKNOWN NAME seemed as fitting for the Mojave Phone Booth as "THE UNKNOWN GOD" was on Mars Hill.

Two of our three vehicles had made this a difficult trip yet it was still a successful one. And I had now introduced five people to the booth.

Recently I asked Krishna whether, overall, he had any regrets about the trip. "No way!" he said without hesitation. "It was a lot of fun. If I could go back in time and had that choice, I'd make it again." What about his friends back home? What were their reactions? "My friends were like, *Hrm. That's interesting. Why would you do that? Hrm. I guess that's an interesting thing to do.*"

Sounds like someone had too many sensible friends. Had any of them already heard of the Booth?

No."

That state of affairs was daily becoming less likely as the Booth's fame continued to spread and its "scary tribe" continued to grow.

NOTES

1 Fair enough, but had I been the phone company employee tasked with removing the Cardhouse.com plaque, I'd like to believe I'd at least have tried to send the plaque maker an email. I mean, the web address was pounded right into it and who knows, maybe the plaque maker would've liked to have the plaque back.

2 Let the word go forth throughout this fair land of freedom with is eight million prison facilities, or whatever the total is up to now, that I do not now knowingly possess, nor have I ever knowingly possessed, any photos of ex-convicts.

BOOTHOGRAPHY III

THE RAY FAMILY AND THE BIRTH OF THE BOOTH

> I took off to the desert in search of "The Booth!" When I arrived three and half hours later, I found none other than Lorene herself taking calls. She and Terry seemed to be having a blast answering calls from all over. They seem to have found a new pastime. When I told her that I'd heard about the booth from your website, she mentioned that she'd never actually met you face to face. So she asked me to pass along greetings.
>
> - Duce of Chubs reader Anthony

> Lorene says you are "shy". Don't be afraid of us. We're just like you.
>
> - Deuce of Clubs reader Patti

As the Booth phenomenon expanded, people worldwide learned Lorene's name and came to speak of her in near-mythic terms. Whenever someone calling the Booth number would happen to catch her there, it was like hitting a jackpot. People would email me to tell me about it and relay messages from her to me. It went along like that for a couple of years, with Lorene and I exchanging greetings through various people that neither of us knew, until several years after the destruction of the Booth we were finally able to meet in person when the Professor and I took a road trip to Tehachapi, California where Lorene's family was gathering for Thanksgiving dinner.

Ordinarily I celebrate no holidays and avoid family functions, so I felt especially uneasy about crashing someone else's holiday family gathering. Cardyhouse and I instead ate a big lunch at a downtown Tehachapi cafe. Later in the afternoon, when I figured the holiday festivities would likely be winding down, we headed over to the home of Sharron, Lorene's sister. Turns out, some people eat Thanksgiving dinner later than others. When we arrived, they hadn't even sat down to eat yet. We explained that we'd already eaten, but it was clear to us that we would be giving offense if we did not eat with the family. (It was clear to us because it was clearly stated to us.) Accordingly, the Professor and I ate two big Thanksgiving meals in a row that day, the second much, much better than the first.

After enjoying the Ray family's kind hospitality, we sat down on the back porch to interview several family members. Unfortunately, I hadn't yet learned how to operate the digital recorder that was a last minute purchase before the trip. I accidentally had it on the high quality setting. which in pretty short order used up the recorder's memory. Cardyhouse and I left on a mission to find someplace in Tehachapi that not only was open on Thanksgiving but in the early evening on Thanksgiving, one that would also be selling any kind of recording device whatsoever. Tall order, but Walgreens came through. We were therefore able to conduct further interviews the following day at Lorene's and Terry's place. It was as true in 1948 as it was a century earlier - if you were out in the desert, it was probably because you were actively in search of something specific, whether with lasso, rifle, or pickaxe. With Lorene's father, Emerson Ray, it was the latter. He had met his future wife, Fay, at a dance in Fillmore, Utah. Fay thought Emerson was handsome but remarked to friends, "Wouldn't it be funny if I married him? I'd become Fay Ray!" [1] Ten days later, she did, and in due course Lorene was born in Fillmore.

Terry says, "Emerson was friends with everybody. Yeah, you would've liked Emerson." Sadly, I was just barely too late for that. Emerson Ray died in 1997, he same year I began calling the Booth he had caused to be installed. Its origins remain somewhat obscure, however. There are different years given, but sometime around 1948 a telephone was established at the base of one of the telephone poles on the new line that now passed near the mine. There is disagreement about when the Booth was installed and even about what type of phone it was. Some say it was a crank phone. Fay at first says it was, then says she isn't sure. Someone posted the following to an online forum: "I lived very near it at the age of 15, at Halloran Summit. My friends and I would ride our dirt-bikes out and around those parts in the desert. At the time there were only hand-cranked phones."

According to the phone company, the phone's official designation was "Cinder Peak Policy Station."

In 1998 Pacific Bell spokesman Steve Allen said, "Though the initial installation date is not known, the Pacific Bell pay phone on Aiken Mine Road has been there for several decades. It was

put there originally as a policy station, a California program that mandates phone installation for the safety, health and welfare of residents in remote locations.

- Lara Hartley, "The Loneliest Phone Booth Makes Its Final Disconnection," *Desert Dispatch* (Barstow, California)

At least two other phone names in the area did include the word *station*, such as Windmill Station, across from where the former Stuckey's stands. Yet there were other areas along the 892 miles of new telephone line where people were living nearby. If the phone near the Cima Mine was established according to policy, one would expect there to have been other remote phone booths along that line, rather than (as far as is known) just the one.

When exchanges were established, the Booth's number became BAker 3-9969. Area codes were established in 1947 (although direct-dial long distance did not become available to phone customers until 1951). Southern California, including the Booth's area, used the area code 213. It was also in 1951 that most of the territory south and east of Los Angeles, including the Booth's area, was split off from 213 and given the area code 714. Population growth since then has been such that 213 is now one of the smallest area codes in all of North America, covering barely more than downtown Los Angeles.

That area code scheme held for about three decades, until 1982, when Imperial County, San Diego County, and the rural (that is, desert) portions of Riverside County and San Bernardino County (where the Booth was) were split off from 714 and rolled into area code 619, which was the Booth s area code when I began phoning it in 1997. I remember it seeming odd that it would have the same area code as San Diego, nearly two hundred miles to the southwest. But that's probably no more strange than that this desert should be under the domination of bureaucrats 175 miles away in San Bernardino. Soon after I began calling the phone, it became part of a large chunk of 619 that was split off and given the area code 760.

That a desert telephone booth way out and away from things should have had a succession of four area codes reflects of the growing numbers of people moving westward over time.

Fay Ray: We got by without a phone for many a year out there. We used to have to go clear to Cima to phone. Either there, or Windmill. We'd get our calls that way.
Lorene Caffee: My dad and mom had it put in originally, you know that story. You know where the Y in the road is, where you either go to the Phone Booth or you go out to our mine? That's where the original Phone Booth was. My dad had it put in.
Fay: It was in our name, so Emerson had the key.
Lorene: He had the key to pick up the money from phone, and then he paid the phone bill on it Well, people got to where they'd go out there and they'd use the phone and make a long distance call and pay for the first three minutes, and then they'd talk, and dad got stuck with the phone bill. So he finally just said, "Hey!" You know? Because he needed the phone to keep track of what trucks were going to be coming in, but it got to the point where he couldn't afford to keep paying the phone bills, so he told the phone company to come and take the Phone Booth out.

But the Phone Booth wasn't taken out Instead, the phone company

took over responsibility for it.

Lorene: I don't know if it was Aiken [a nearby miner] or Overson [a nearby rancher] or who it was who said they still wanted it. That was the only communication people bad out there.

At some point after 1960 - again, exactitude is hard to come by - the phone was enclosed within a phone booth at its original location.

Bob Ray: It was out there when my ex-wife and myself took my first vacation I'd taken in years. We bad a daughter, young daughter, at that time, and so we left her with Mom and Dad so I could go in and gamble a little bit in Vegas, and that was in the early sixties. Probably around '61, '62 - something like that.
Doc: You could see that spot from the mine?
Lorene: Oh, yeah.
Terry Caffee: Then they shot all of the windows out of it. Sometimes during the fall, that thing would shine like a beacon.
Fay: They broke every window out of the house, too.
Doc: How often would the phone company come out and empty the coin box?
Terry: I think they had a person that regularly had to run that line - say, once a month.
Lorene: There were times we couldn't call out because there was too much money in the box.

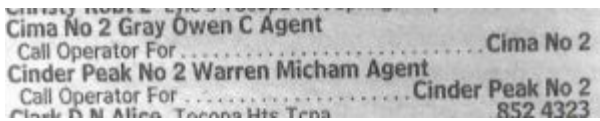
Apparently sometime between 1968 and 1972, the Booth was moved to its final location. Not long afterward Charlie Wilcox arrived.

Charlie Wilcox: First time I ever come out here, Doyle Taylor had sent me a map to the mine. He says, "My bus is sitting right there at the mine." So I loaded up all the kids and everything and we come up. He says, "If you make a wrong turn, you'll come to a phone booth." I went up and I drove all around the mine, all through it - not a soul, no bus. Come back out at three o'clock in morning, pulled up at that phone booth and I said, "I'm not goin' no further." We just laid our beds out on the ground right there in front of the Booth. Went to bed. Next morning, we had cattle all over us.

What the late Peter Wild wrote of Shady Myrick, another desert character, applies also to Charlie: "He was an old-timer par excellence ... a rescuer of greenhorns who foolishly wandered off ... and a befriender of newcomers." That describes the role Charlie Wilcox carved out for himself in the Booth saga, eventually carrying business cards someone made for him touting his role as unofficial tour guide of the Mojave Phone Booth.

I met Charlie at the Booth only once, as far as I can recall. We knew one another mostly by way of reputation, and hearing about one another by way of others. I was the kook who put the Booth up on a website and he was the guardian angel who rescued people who came out to see the Booth with little to no thought of what the terrain would be like or that a person in a desert might want to bring along some water to drink. When I met Charlie it was before bunches of people were going out there to answer the phone. Before that, Charlie had passed by it countless times and "never gave it a thought," he said. Locals had naturally viewed the Booth as neither more nor less than what it was: a utilitarian object, meant for making phone calls.

Charlie: It cost two dollars just to call the Stuckey's store from the Booth. Yeah, from right there is long distance.
Doc: The first time you saw the Booth, it still had glass?
Charlie: Yeah. And it had the crank in it. They took the crank and put just the box up there, and you'd pick it up and they'd answer you and you'd tell 'em who you wanted. Next time they changed it, it was with the push buttons. Modernized it. Too much trouble to keep a special operator, I guess. 'Cause you'd have to call to get the operator, then ask for the special operator, then she would have to dial it in.
Doc: So it went directly from a crank phone to a touch-tone, without ever being a rotary dial?
Charlie: It never did have a rotary in it The phone didn't have any numbers or nothing on it. You'd just crank it, then the operator'd come on and you'd just tell her the number. Or, if you wanted to call that phone, you'd ask for a special operator, and she would dial the number for you.
Doc: Where was this operator?
Charlie: San Bernardino, I think. I never did call it, but I have been around when they was calling it. Doyle used to use it quite a bit. He said, "Well, if you ever have to get ahold of me, just ask for the special operator and tell her you want Cinder Peak Number 2, and she'll dial it in."


Cima No 2 Gray Owen C Agent
Call Operator For ..... Cima No 2
Cinder Peak No 2 Warren Micham Agent
Call Operator For ..... Cinder Peak No 2
852 4323

Charlie's recollections are mirrored by another former resident of the area.

Anthony Taylor: I lived near the Booth from 1972 until about 1983. It was a crank phone up until the early 1980s on a party line and its ring was two longs and a short. In 1973 it almost got wiped out by a '69 Ford Country Squire with a 428. A l4-year-old was driving showing me, a 12-year-old how to power slide and blew the left rear tire. We came to rest inches from the Booth, glad we or it never got hurt. I missed out on its world fame. I would've enjoyed talking to people all over the world.

The Ray's recollections differ somewhat.

Bob: To tell you the truth, I never saw a crank phone there. And I used it just about as soon as it was ever put in by Dad and Mom.
Lorene: It was a rotary.
Terry: They didn't have touch-tone phones then. They would've had to have a rotary.

Possibly, although:

The first touch-tone system was installed in Baltimore, MD, in 1941. By the early 1960, low-cost transistors and associated circuit components made the introduction of touch-tone into home telephones possible. The first commercial touch-tone phones were a big hit in their preview at the 1962 Seattle World' Fair.

- CrimethInc., *Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook*

Hard to determine for sure, unless the phone company comes up with some records that prove it one way or the other.

Terry: I think the reason they put in the new phone, basically, was so that people could use credit cards.
Lorene: Yeah, for the same problem, the vandalism. In fact, it wasn't too long before when you started calling that you could still put money in that phone - and when they started getting the

phones to where you could only use with a credit card or collect.
Doc: The Booth phone still had a coin slot
Lorene: But it wouldn't accept coins.
Terry: They did something to it.

Eventually the Caffees were forced to add a phone other than the Booth's phone.

Bob: When we first went out to start mining after my Dad couldn't any more, we were using [the Booth] as our only means of communication, until we were ordered by MSHA. The Mine Safety and Health Administration told us we had to have a phone, so we ended up getting a phone other than that one.
Terry: We went out there about September-October of 1990. I think in about 1993 MSHA came out wanting to know if we had a phone. We said, yeah, we got one right over there!

(Meaning, of course, the Booth.)

Terry Caffee: They said, "But you don't have one here at the mine? Well, you're going to have to get one."
Lorene Caffee: Unfortunately, cell phones had come out.
Terry Caffee: So we got one of those Motorola bag phones.
Lorene Caffee: I still went over to the Phone Booth for my calls.

And a good thing for Booth fans that she did!

NOTES

1 Fay Wray was a famous actress of yesteryear, best known for playing the beauty who "killed the beast" in *King Kong*.

WORLD WIDE BOOTH

"Looking for a fanatical following? Click the Mojave Phone Booth Site! Here is the tale of one man's exploration of a phone booth in the middle of the desert which has spawned copycat sites all over the Internet. View the original transcript of the first conversation with the "Mojave Lady." Read the travelogues of this publisher's trip, to the Phone Booth. See "The Dangerously Brief Desert Primer," and be sure to find out how Park Rangers declared war on the Booth. Looking for a unique travelogue? Check out The Mojave Phone Booh Site!"

- Online advertising copy (written by some marketing copywriter, not me)

When people asked me how I'd managed to fledge a planetary craze, I fully understood that what they were really asking was, *How did a barely employable goof of a hermit like YOU manage to fledge a planetany craze?*

I did not know then. I do not know now. You might as well ask a bleeding, broken man how he managed to make his way from the top of the mine shaft to the bottom. It's not crazy to ask. how he came to be at the opening of a mine shaft or how he happened to fall in, but the rest prey well takes care of itself. Which is to say, it wasn't that I executed a plan. I merely took a step and [*slide whistle*]. Even so, in the words of J. G. Ballard, "If I'd planned it myself, I couldn't have hit the target more exactly."

Fortunes could be made if the etiology of the Mojave Phone Booth

phenomenon could be distilled into even some patchwork of a formula. Hell, if I had any idea how to grab worldwide attention at will, I would at this very moment be at the helm of a 72-foot luxury yacht in the South Pacific instead of at the keyboard of a l0-year-old, mid-range notebook computer in a 30-year-old van parked outside a coffee shop so I can use its free Wi-Fi.

I do think one reason for the success of the Mojave Phone Booth Project was the fact that - and I don't intend the pun - it was not phony. I think the project read clearly as a legitimate interest of an actual human being, not as, say, the creation of some PR firm as a stunt to support a marketing campaign.

Quite a few people had picked up on the Booth story via the web, but media helium floated the talk around the world, crossing language barriers and imaginary border lines, widening the Booth's user base by the hour. By the end of the millennium, people of just about every tongue spoke some version of Booth: *La cabine télephonique la plus isolée et la plus célèbre du monde.....Leszerelték a világ legmagányosabb telefonját ... El teléfono más solitario del mundo ... La cabina más aislada del mundo... Die kultigste Telefonzelle der Welt steht in der Wüste ... La cabina más famosa de la Red ... La cabina di telefono più sola nel mondo ... Een eezame telefooncel in de Mojave woestijn.* Even if there were space in this book to reproduce them all, I couldn't because the computer I'm typing on doesn't have all the necessary character sets. Babelfish and I got to be good pals, even if I could hardy understand what my good pal was trying to say a good part of the time.

Sometimes Booth fans translated for me, as happened with one of my favorite Booth headlines, "Der Arsch der Welt hat die Nummer," an expression kindly explained for me by a Hamburger named Esther. "I have read a small article on 'your?' phone booth in the middle of nowhere, subtitled, 'The World's Ass Has A Number' (here in Germany we refer to 'out in the sticks, in the middle of nowhere,' etc. as 'the world's ass')." Bits of helpful cross-cultural knowledge exchange occurred. I learned that a phone booth is in some places called a "phone box" or a "cabinet." And where in the U.S. we say a telephone line is "busy," in the U.K. it is said to be "engaged."

Before long, professional "cool hunters" latched onto the Booth. Marketing firms tried to figure out how to co-opt the viral nature of Internet phenomena such as the Mojave Phone Booth, the Dancing Baby, and the Hampster [*sic*] Dance. People began emailing to ask me whether this or that appearance of a desert telephone booth was inspired by the Mojave Phone Booth. Several desert phone booth-related commercials *did* suspiciously crop up, such as one for US West, another for 1-800-COLLECT, and a weird one for a law office, a spot entitled "Lonely Phone Booth."

Various films and music videos began featuring lone phone booths flanked by Joshua trees. David Letterman even began a running bit, "Open Mic Night in the Mojave Desert in California." References to the Booth were inserted or shoehorned, often awkwardly, into music reviews ("His missives sound straight out of the Mojave Phone Booth; the important point is not his message, but that it's coming from where it's coming from") and stories on NPR's *This Amerian Life.*

The Booth inspired some people to write short stories and many others to want to tell me their plans to make films about or inspired by the Booth.

- I'm an indie filmmaker from LA and rm going to come out and shoot a one-day documentary on the phone, the calls, and whoever happens to be answering the phone.
- We're all a bunch of film students making the trip (from Cleveland and Florida) and we'll be making our own little documentary about the whole thing.
- I'm looking to do a video on the phone booth i see your in az. I am in phoenix could you help me with my movie? I also would like to get directions if possible?
- The whole experience has inspired a documentary I might pursue about a trek to the booth."
- I am a filmmaker working on a documentary about the Mojave phone booth phenomenon. More specifically I will be focusing on the phone booth on New Year's Eve.
- I am going to propose that Pacific Bell External Affairs put up a couple $1,000 so I can make a documentary about the phone. One of the films that did manage to reach comple

One of the films that did manage to reach completion was an independent short called *Dead Line*, which I saw when it screened at a film festival in Arizona.

From poetry books to Finnish art-rock band album covers, things got not only curiouser and curiouser but randomer and randomer. It's even possible I sometimes might have seen a Mojave Phone Booth reference where there was none.

> Sometimes security matters will necessitate that the number not be connected to any individuals, lest they be investigated; for such actions, the number could be a public phone of some kind - **say, a payphone in the middle of nowhere** that takes incoming calls, flanked by scouts who can announce incoming police.
>
> - CrimethInc., *Reicpes for Disaster*

It got to where there started to be a little bit of backlash against the Booth, as Internet commenters began complaining about popular websites. Someone at Brunching Shuttlecocks wrote, "I hereby declare that linking to Lileks has

become as passe as linking to The Onion. I think I first saw the Frahm gallery about 5 years ago, and I've probably seen hundreds of people say 'Ooooh, check out this cool site!' since then. Same goes for Deuce of Clubs, Spinnwebe, Joe Cartoon, and that foreign rectal objects website that was created five minutes after Gore invented the internet." Likewise, Whim & Vinegar announced, "All right folks, CNN Fringe picked up on the Mojave Phone Booth. It's no longer news. Or deserted."

My favorite testament to the Booth's growing fame during the media onslaught came by way of the kind person who was at the time secretly hosting my website at a famous and storied institution of higher learning. This person forwarded an article about the Booth to Professor Cardyhouse, prefacing it with the following note: "this is a message that came across the [*redacted*] mailing list today. it's from this morning's [*publication name redacted*]. the funny thing is that i said 'hi' to [*author name redacted*] in the hallway about 20 minutes before he sent this. he has no idea that godfrey's site runs on a machine in our building (in my office). it's a small URL after all."

Die einsamste Telefonzelle der Welt
La cabina más famosa de la Red
Ein Rasc nächste Web-Haus ist zu entnehmen, dass sich die Omanat Base, Kalifornien, auf halber Strecke zwischen Barstow und Baxter City und darauf in der Wüstenluft Arizonas, das Mojave-Gebirge befindet. Bis nach Las Vegas sind es 75 Meilen, ins Death Valley etwa 50, besonders sehenswürdig der McNally im Abendlicht
Una cabina telefónica situada en el medio del desierto
Mojave llama la atención de internautas de todo
Inbrank Deuce of Clubs
Em un luogo d'incontro per cybernauti di passaggio
Leszerelték a világ legmagányosabb telefonfülkéjét

BOOTH BLIZZARD

During the previous visit, dealing with the results of media attention meant answering a whole lot of phone calls and doing a whole lot of interviews. During this visit we would deal with two actual media members who were coming out to join us at the Booth, one from Barstow, the other from Phoenix. Having already dealt with lots of reporters in my life, even before the Booth hubbub, I had some apprehension. I didn't know that, as had been the case with Krishna and me, the Phoenix reporter was just as leery of me as I was of him. The article he wrote after the trip began as follows:

> "There is a phone booth," goes a story born on the Internet, "in the middle of he desert"
>
> The Internet is such an electronic prankster nowadays. Deceptive banner ads, chain e-mails promising cash from Bill Gates, fraud on eBay ... who would trust a Web site with the tagline "Laying the groundwork for an insanity plea since 1995"? What if you go and the booth isn't there? What if nobody else shows up and you're left alone with some wacko? What if the phone is ringing, you answer it and a voice giggles, April Fool's!" There are so many reasons not to participate in such idiocy.

It would have been funny if the whole phenomenon really had been a hoax I had perpetrated by producing all the Booth photographs on my site by digitally altering photos of the phone booth in my living room - I had by this time bought a real telephone booth - and publicizing some phone number I controlled that in reality rang via call forwarding to the phone booth in my living room. Sure, it would have taken an improbable and labyrinthine conspiracy to pull that off properly, but what's the Internet for, if not improbable and labyrinthine conspiracies?

Within months, we would seriously contemplate trying to pull off exactly such a hoax in response to yet another gathering storm, this one emanating from officialdom (or, as long experience compels me to think of it, Official Dumb). I was already hearing rumors of bureaucratic rumblings against the Booth. Yet it was easy for me to force those darkening thoughts to the very back of my mind because WEEEEEEEEEEEE ANOTHER BOOTH TRIP!

That's me, Big Picture every time.

This would be the first trip where people who had already been at the Booth with me, Professor Cardyhouse and Krishna, agreed to show up a second time. A few others emailed their intentions to join us, if possible. I would be the first to arrive, if all went well, and I won't be offended if you laughed when you read that. My objective, yet again, was to arrive in the daytime, but this time my strategy was different. For one thing, I was traveling alone. Also, I decided to take a different route, involving a solo desert crossing that would take me to the Booth in such a way that, except for a small stretch of I-40 between Kingman and Needles, I could avoid Interstates. Finally, I decided to try to avoid further automotive incidents by driving a different vehicle this time, an old Toyota pickup temporarily paroled from its usual spot in my driveway, groaning beneath a camper so massively oversized it resembled the rack of ribs that overturns the car in the opening credits of *The Flintstones*. I removed the camper before the trip, which in retrospect seemed to have been a not very bright move, but at least the truck wasn't *Whip It!* which therefore promised an increased likelihood of actual transportation.

Pretty laughable thinking on my part, in that the truck was old and hadn't been running well. I'd had it out of the shop only a couple of days after major engine work, which for no reason I could have pointed to seemed to me as good a time as any to try and drive it alone across long stretches of Mojave Desert trails over a route I'd never traveled before, during which I was likely to pass no other vehicle for distances of many, many miles. The truth is, my transportation options at the time were almost as limited as my decision-making skills. I was either *Whip It!* or the truck, and *Whip It!* was completely inoperative at the time. Besides, as Ernie Kovacs once remarked, "It's no fun if you play it safe all the time." And a weird thing about me is, I do like fun.

There are desert circumstances that even the seasoned desert explorer knows merit at least some measure of dread. At the same time, even when those circumstances present themselves, such a person usually still feels joy and excitement at the sensation of still being alive, damn it all, and even more so if these circumstances occur in a unfamiliar desert place. One is alone, and one has a goal, whatever it might be, even if that goal consists of no more than to stay alive. For a lover of desert, that and plenty of water are all the ingredients necessary to gin up a reasonably rosy outlook.

My trip's only planned sub-destinations were the Lanfair phone (the other phone booth in the Mojave that Dennis Casebier had mentioned) and Goffs, home of the old Goffs schoolhouse and Dennis Casebier himself. In keeping with my usual M.O., I had made no prior arrangements with Mr. Cascbier. I just took a chance he might happen to be around. He wasn't, so I left him a note that, given the vehicle in which I was foolishly crossing the desert, had the potential to save my life because it included my planned route.

According to local lore, the Lanfair phone, officially designated Lanfair #1, used to be enclosed by a booth. The only old photos I've seen of it so far show it as merely a pedestal phone. At any rate, it was moved off the main road at some point and became a kiosk. Even making allowance for its lack of a booth, it wasn't anything like *the* Booth. It didn't even have a kiosk but was attached directly to a telephone pole across the street from some occupied dwellings and trailers. Casebier said it had been moved from its original location because it was being vandalized. It was remote but not WTF! remote. From there, I dialed - of course - the Mojave Phone Booth, to hear its familiar ring.[1]

People who told me about payphones they claimed were as remote as the Mojave Phone Booth were usually thinking of either the Lanfair phone or a phone booth in Darwin, California, reputed to be the World's Hottest Phone Booth," or a phone some called "The Loneliest Phone" because of its location beside Nevada's Highway 50, often called "America's Loneliest Highway," except by Idahoans, who claim the same title for their Highway 93.

After Lanfair it was, for the most part, *Goodbye, civilization and hello, potential for disaster*. My typical road trip, in other words. I took my time, winding slowly westward from just outside of Needles. A good deal of the route I was traveling formed part of the actual Mojave Road that Dennis Casebier has written books about. During all that time, I saw only a few people. My truck was only two-wheel-drive, so there were places where I had to be careful how I slowed down or sped up. Driving on sand is in that way a little like driving on ice (or so I've read; thank Wotan, I'm not someone who's had much need to drive on ice). It had been raining in the days previous, so the truck's lack of four-wheel drive probably should have been a concern, but I'm just experienced enough at two-wheeling on desert sands to have had a probably overblown confidence in my abilities in that area.

After a few hours, I crossed Cima Road, the road down which Professor Cardyhouse and I had gone barreling when we were lost on the first trip. This was sort of a Rubicon moment. Beyond here I'd be pretty much beyond assistance. Every mile from here would be a mile I'd have to hike out if something went wrong with the truck. In such situations you find yourself glancing down at your odometer more often than you otherwise might and meditating upon the exact number of miles of trudging back to a main road you'd have to do in order to survive.

I had lots of water and food with me, of course, and I know how to give

myself a decent chance of surviving a decent amount of time under desert conditions. I kept thinking, though, about others who might read about the Booth and try to visit it, people who might be not at all equipped to survive the desert. If someone were to wander out here without forethought and die, it would suck for both the dead and the living, particularly any among the living who might have blithely offered directions or crude Photoshopped maps over the Internet to people they didn't even know (*cough, cough*).

After a pleasant half-hour or so, I reached the road paralleling the line of phone poles leading to the Booth. This was the dirt road I'd talked Ponyboy and Daniel into taking when we left the Booth. I hadn't approached the Booth from this direction before, but according to the map, I had only to rum right when I got to the big N in the word NATIONAL (on the map, that is - there wasn't a mile-long *N* spelled out with white decorative rocks, although I admit I did briefly consider undertaking that as my next project).

As I slowed to take the corner, the truck nearly got stuck in the sand, but I managed to coax it to climb out. When I had a moment to focus my attention further up the trail, I noticed human figures in the distance shambling toward me. I thought at first that these might be people who'd been trying to find the Booth and become lost. If so, they were miles off the mark and heading the wrong way, and I was now their hero, except of course for being sort of responsible for their being out there in the first place.

The figures turned out to be a long, straggling ant trail of Mormon Boy Scouts hiking across the Mojave with no apparent adult supervision. As I continued toward the Booth I kept passing clutches of sullen Scouts trudging along about as slowly as one can move forward and still call it walking. Trouble was, the trail was narrow, with brush often scraping both sides of my truck. I didn't care about the scraping, but I couldn't slow down without getting the truck tires buried in the loose sand.

Despite this, most of the Scouts were blocking the trail by walking two or three abreast, neither courteous enough to yield the trail to their elder nor sharp enough to calculate that it might be wise to yield the trail to a 1,700-pound motorized vehicle. Even if they hadn't earned merit badges for courtesy, no one should need a badge for self-preservation. Then again, an all-day forced march under the desert sun might well yield ill effects on the brain.

The pair of Scouts bringing up the rear, one tall and the other short, were an especially pathetic sight. The short boy was weeping. I pulled the truck up onto the hard-pack and into the brush so I could stop without burying the truck tires in the sand.

"He hurt his ankle," the taller boy offered without being asked.

Had he twisted it? "No," he tall boy said, in partial fulfillment of his Official Spokesman merit badge. "It's just sore from walking." He said the rest

of their leaders would soon be coming up the trail from behind (no doubt in comfortable air-conditioned trucks, I thought) and would pick up any stragglers.

That being the case, I said, why not find some shade to sit in and just wait for one of the trucks, instead of trying to hobble through the desert on a bum ankle?

The Scouts received this most obvious of suggestions as if it were the Damascus epiphany, sinking to the ground where they were, faces blanked in wonder. Their expressions probably resembled the Professor's and mine when we figured out that snowflake button. I thought of the old anecdote about the nobleman riding in a coach who complained about the rain getting into his mouth. After one of his servants delicately suggested that perhaps his lordship might consider closing his mouth, he did, and thoughtfully observed, "The rain doesn't come in now."

Only a few miles past the ant trail of Boy Scouts the Mojave Phone Booth came into view. I had finally arrived at the Booth in the daytime! (Take *that*, Ponyboy!) I stepped out of the truck and laughed the laugh of one experiencing that special category of joy that comes from knowing one has gotten away with having taken a foolhardy risk.

Alone at the Booth

Having finally managed to arrive at the Booth in the daylight, my next project, an unscheduled one, was to pick up trash left behind by "one of the nation's largest and most prominent values-based youth development organizations," as its official website describes the Boy Scouts - you know, the group that preaches the wilderness ethic "Leave No Trace." I suppose one could argue about the exact meaning of trace, but the lunching Boy Scouts had left behind sandwich bags, cookie wrappers, and even a banana peel. (Wacky Physical Comedy merit badge - merited!) The trash was concentrated around that large pile of white decorative rocks that had been dumped 20 or 30 yards from the Booth. I suppose those rocks could have been considered litter, but at least they were natural, in that they were rocks. Contrary to wild and unfounded NPS claims later on, those Boy Scout leavings constituted the only trash I ever saw there.

I used to wonder who had shattered the Booth's windows. Eight years after this visit, a confession arrived via email that answered my question. You've probably guessed it.

> As part of an annual Boy Scout endurance hike, every spring time my troop and other troops from my church would start a 32.5 mile one-day endurance hike starting at Halloran Summit, passing the phone booth and ending at the Kelso train depot where we would camp for the night. As you can imagine, seeing the phone booth and calling home from it was one of the highlights of our trip. When I first saw it, there were no bullet holes. Another year we brought a paint ball gun with

us and shot up the booth with paint balls. Another year we broke out the windows of the booth.

"We weren't exactly angels," admits the Mormon ex-Boy Scout.

Other than the small amount of Boy Scout litter, the Booth and environs looked the same as before. After I finished clearing all traces of Scouting from the area, I swept out the Booth and straightened things up as best I could, as had already become customary during Booth visits. A woman from Hawaii later wrote, "I love how you cleaned and tidied the booth. My daughter's a hula dancer and the *halaus* (hula schools) clean and tidy the *heiau* or ancient temples where you leave your lie on the altar after a performance. It's a lovely idea, no?" Indeed it is. During my previous visit I had collected a bunch of broken Booth glass, but quite a bit still remained on the floor of the Booth and all over the surrounding area. I brought back a nearly full five-gallon bucket of it in the interest of science or, science failing to be interested, some private project of my own.[2]

The great thing about the day, though, and I couldn't help but stop to notice it about every hundred and twenty seconds, was that I was all alone in the desert. Although I enjoy it when a desert acts up, 1t was on its best behavior on that gorgeous, blue-skied, fluffy-clouded afternoon. Save for my encounter with Scouting, I'd been alone the entire day.

> I do remember that one realization wafted through my mind when I was up there. I noted that here were two guys farther away from anything than two guys had ever been before. That's what I thought about. And yet, at the same time, I was very conscious that everything was being closely scrutinized a quarter of a million miles away.
>
> - Buzz Aldrin, "What It Feels Like to Walk on the Moon"

I understand what people mean about a visit to a remote desert feeling a little like a moon mission. That feeling was more intense at the Booth because its growing renown meant that there was a certain amount of (admittedly not-quite-Mission-Control-level) scrutiny directed my way. The site of the Booth wasn't the farthest I'd ever been from civilization, not by a long shot. From the Booth, remember, Interstate 15 was only a dozen miles away. But it was the farthest I had ever been from civilization while still maintaining contact with civilization.

Cell phones have now all but obliterated the possibility of that sensation. In this regard, two decades ago might as well be a century ago. It doesn't feel the same at the Booth's location today and probably couldn't, even without a cell phone, because one knows that anyone happening along would probably be carrying one. (Whether there would be cell service is a controversial issue we'll touch on later.)

Chief among my activities that day, of course, was answering the phone. On my previous Booth visit the phone had rung steadily. Now it rang whenever I wasn't talking on it. The moment I would put the receiver back on the cradle, the phone would begin ringing again. It was like the phone booth on that episode of *Pete and Pete* that rang without stopping, except in

Wellsville everyone was afraid to answer it.

Some callers asked whether I was lonely. That struck me as kind of funny. I was alone yet not lonely because I wasn't really alone. I was talking to loads of people, one after another, on a pay telephone while desert breezes blew across the mouthpiece. I was feeling chatty - I get that way in the desert, ask anyone who knows me - so it wasn't always easy for other callers to get through. Bon von Wheelie from Girl Trouble later told me, "We tried to call you. We were practicing and stuff and we tried a bunch of times to call you and we couldn't get through!" I was a long way from the first visit, when I had to page my pal Audra so I could hear the Booth's phone ring.

I had other company out there too. That afternoon I experienced for the first rime a military fly-by. Some pilot joker from a nearby Air Force base executed an extremely low-altitude Booth buzz. At the time there'd been just the one little Gulf War dust-up some years previous, so military pilots were probably getting bored but I can tell you that being the object of a supersonic fly-by is not boring. There's no warning at all - it's like an earthquake from out of the sky, ZHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM-chikKOWWNNNG! But when I looked up to where the noise was coming from, I saw nothing. By the time the sound reached me, the jet was already off in the distance, where I spotted it in time to see the wise-ass pilot waggling the wings at me. I had to laugh at such a whimsical, costly, taxpayer-financed neener-neener.

It must have been an odd thing for a pilot to notice someone at the Booth. Charlie Wilcox would later tell me pilots would often buzz people when they spotted them out there. "You could see the rivets in their wings, they'd be so low. I've had 'em come out and wave at me as they go over. They can really scare you. I've had 'em come over and I thought they was gonna hit the telephone lines, they'd be so low."

What with phone conversations and sneaky military flybys, several hours passed in what felt like not even an hour. The sun was going down and I still hadn't made a single move to set up camp. Instead, I was having a long phone chat with Livi in Salt Lake City, whose plan to make the trek to meet us had been foiled by auto trouble. Another would-be Booth visitor, Carrie from Coronado, called to report that she too had been thwarted by her car. It would turn out to be not entirely unfortunate for them that they didn't try to force their cars into the Mojave that day.

Cold Conclave

Out hyar th' weather's hot... an' cold?
Most days are warm an' sunny,
But ... slepin' neath th' moon an' stars,
Er rain. boys. chills:... ain't funny!

- Chuck Haas, Out Hyar," from
Rhymes o' a Driffin' Cowboy

You might have noticed how much Sibelius, Grieg. and other composers from cold climates loved to write music celebrating Spring. It was April but I didn't hear any music coming from Wagner's carrying bag that night. It wasn't November cold but, no mistake, it was cold.

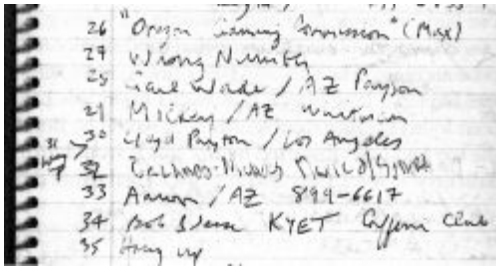
Eventually I saw headlights at the top of the rise, north of the Booth. It felt kind of weird, just sitting in the Booth and watching the lights get nearer and nearer. As a kid out on the desert, I used to hide if I saw anyone else. The desert can be a weird place and often attracts weird people. If an encounter was avoidable, I avoided it. That wasn't an option here, of course. For one thing, my truck was plainly visible. For another thing, so was I. Most importantly, this would likely be the first of my Booth arrivals, and so it was. Tecopa Jane was a habitual Mojave wanderer I had known only by email. As she set up her tent, I was thinking how if I hadn't been yakking on the phone, I'd have had plenty of time to set up my tent too. Then I remembered hearing or reading something about an Alaskan air mass being pushed southward down the continent. Had I not forgotten about it before packing for the trip, I wouldn't have ended up bivouacked that night in the back of a pickup truck underneath three sleeping bags with a vinyl tarp stretched for a windbreak just above me, across the sides of the truck.

Awakened by voices after 3:00 a.m., I reflexively sat up in the bed of the truck and bumped the tarp with my head, covering myself with hundreds of near-freezing droplets of water that had condensed on its underside. When I heard their voices I thought these might be just random goofs. Then I realized strangers would probably be inclined to whisper. No, these were specific goofs. These were goofs I knew.

I emerged, drenched, from my truck-fort into the freezing pre-dawn to see Krishna and Professor Cardyhouse rummaging around in their rented car. The two of them had left the Bay Area at around 7:00 in the evening. I remember groggily thinking, *So, then - other folks than I really will return to visit the Mojave Phone Booth. How about that*.

The Professor said Krishna drove the entire way and that the speedometer needle rarely dipped below 90 from San Francisco to the Cima exit. Now they were sleepy. I was sleepy too, and cold, and now also soaked. Had I been a convict on the run, I think I'd have turned myself in for a bowl of hot soup.

I warmed myself a little by thinking about how we'd already broken last year's Booth attendance record by one. Then I thought some more about hot soup. Instead of building a warm, inviting campfire, I mainly just shuffled around, muttering. Though the Booth's phone was still ringing, I was too zonked to take a turn at answering it, so I asked the guys to take the phone off the hook when they went to sleep. I was too sleepy to untie the tarp to get back into bed, so I tried to crawl back under it carefully and got dew-dropped on again. I didn't take long for me to sink into a soggy slumber. The Professor slept in the rental car. Krishna opted to stretch out on the ground.



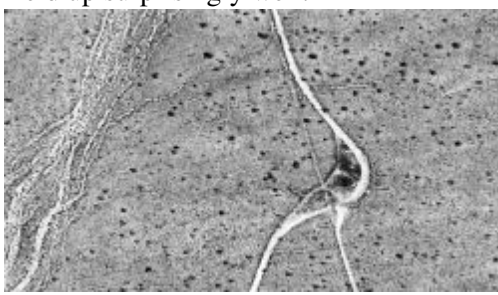
In the morning, the Professor was the last to awaken. "By the time I woke up the next morning, everyone else was rustling around. Any calls that came in were being logged - location, name. The log was already up to 40 calls."

We probably could have waited until the Professor was awake tp put the phone back on the hook, but at the Booth sleep was often sacrificed to the ringing of the Booth's bell. Start of the day, start of the day's Booth projects: Rule of the Booth. And there were a lot of projects. We stayed so usy that it wasn't always easy to answer the phone, though someone almost always did.

When I was getting ready to leave Arizona, a music-related project theme had seemed to be developing for this Booth visit. I thought it would be fun if notorious Phoenix lounge singer Vic Masters could work a phone booth theme into his show if he happened to be playing out on one of the nights we were at the Booth. Maybe he could call the Booth and we could duet on "I'm In A Phone Booth, Baby." Vic wanted to know, "Who's your favorite up & coming female vocalist? Can we have a three-way call? If you can arrange that, I'd like to sing Jim Reeves' 'He'll Have To Go.' "

Coincidentally, I had planned to conduct the first-ever DeuceOfClubs.com interview to be recorded at the Mojave Phone Booth, chatting with one of my "favorite up & coming female vocalists," April March. I'd been working on setting up the interview, but somehow placing or accepting, a telephone call couldn't be wedged anywhere into April March's April, so the interview took place later.[3]

Contrary to some published reports, the area that included the Booth did have a telephone directory. Now that the Booth had acquired some notoriety, Pacific Bell actually replaced the directory from time to time after people would steal them. I was also glad to see the Mojave Phone Booth Interplanetary Message still in place where I'd attached it inside the Booth. It had held up surprisingly well.


This time I brought along a printout of the Mojave Phone Booth Satellite Photo that Lazio Nibble had

found, on which I marked "YOU ARE HERE."

I added a few other things to the Booth, such as a magnet carrying the visage of Slim Wagner (a visual mashup of Wagner and Slim Whitman made by my pal Gila Mon for the Deuce of Clubs international "Una Paloma Blanca" contest) and plastic magnetic letters and numbers that spelled out the Booth's name and number. (All these items would soon disappear via agencies unidentified.)

Others had been leaving things at the Booth, most cool, some not so cool. Examples of the latter were a pair of pointless and heavy padlocks, one on the phone book cord, the other on the phone's receiver cord, adding unwelcome weight when talking on the phone. Someone actually emailed to take credit for having put those on there, which seemed to me a weird thing to expect praise for. I was glad someone managed to remove them sometime after my next visit.

Happily, the cool things far outnumbered the not cool. Someone left a cassette tape marked "PLAY ME." I like to believe that whoever followed that directive changed size and was taken into Looking Glass Land. Someone from the town of Mojave even brought out a full-size park-style bench. Unfortunately, the bench too was removed.

Interspersed with our projects were interviews with radio stations, both worldwide (New Zealand, Italy, et al.) and nearby (e.g., Los Angeles rock mainstay KROQ). Professor Cardyhouse noticed that after my "KROQ interview and the broadcast of the number, there was a sudden increase in the amount of calls we got that were variants of the following whimsical themes: 'Why are you doing this, dude? or 'Dude, I can't believe you're out in the desert there, dude!'" We got quite a few calls from confused people whose friends had dialed their pagers and left the Booth's number as a call-back.

Next it was sign dedication time. I had brought along the original metal real-estate sign that had stood in front of my parents' house when they bought it in 1973. The sign had been wedged behind their backyard shed ever since. I spray-painted it with some green and yellow paint left over from painting the *Whipped Cream & Other Delights* logo onto *Whip It!'s* hood and brought black paint for lettering. Jane was a professional cartoonist, so I recruited her to letter the following message:

THE MOJAVE PHONE BOOTH:
You *could* shoot it,
but why would you want to?

If nothing else, I figured, maybe people would shoot the sign instead of the Booth.

The most time-consuming project was aimed not at visitors to the Booth but at those flying over it. That large pile of white decorative rock had been sitting there just begging for something to do. I didn't know for what purpose it had been dumped there, but sometimes it's easier just to tum things to one's

own purpose. As someone raised in territory where it's customary to use white rocks to form letters on mountains,[4] what I thought might be a pretty good purpose for the rocks was to arrange them to spell out the word PHONE in large letters. We'd seen lots of jetliners overhead. Passing aircraft pilots and passengers might not know the Booth was there. I thought we could help them out with that.

The Professor's experience in graphic design (he did the design work for

this book, in fact) made me think it best that he be the one to trace out the letters on the ground, with what he termed "a large, professional stick." I never asked him what font he was going for. He also came up with the time- and labor-saving idea to use the rock pile itself as the **O**, which also gave us the size of our letters.

Unfortunately, that size rendered our project even more pointless than we intended. Nobody at 30,000 feet was going to discover the Booth because of our message. Letters only about 15 feet long are woefully unequal to the task - as were we, obviously, in not thinking it through better. The word we spelled out wouldn't even be visible, let alone legible, to anyone more than a few hundred feet above the ground.

"I never thought about that," the Professor says. "I was just thinking 'What's the largest size we can make without destroying vegetation, without running out of rocks, and without collapsing in the sun?' I got two out of three, though the collapsing was later, if you want to get technical." (Hello, foreshadowing!)

Maybe we should have used all the stones to make a giant phone icon instead. Oh, well. This was our fourth in a series of expeditions to a remote Phone Booth in the desert; there was no reason to start dragging logic into things at that point. We spent quite a while working on it. Whoever wasn't actively working toward local rock message enhancement was tasked with answering the constantly ringing phone.

(From the Professor's trip notes)
Most of the callers have been asking for Godfrey specifically, even though they don't know him. We employed various tactics, from claiming that he was indisposed to claiming to *be* him. The next caller was from Albania, which was certainly important enough to warrant yelling out for Godfrey.

To have complete strangers from Albania phone from across the globe and ask for you by name is an experience I can recommend if you want to know just how wonderfully bizarre the world can be.

At that time, the Balkan War was raging, the Serbian army had invaded Albania, the country was overwhelmed with refugees, and news reports had painted a picture of general chaos. I kept trying to ask the caller how he was faring and whether he and his family were safe. The caller, however, was in no mood to answer questions. He had just connected to the Mojave Phone Booth! He was in the mood to shout. For a few minutes, the mayhem raging all around him didn't matter. He was talking to the desert, Jack! He kept shouting "PHONE!" and "AMERICA!!" while in the background a woman kept shouting, "WE ARE ON AMERICAN RADIO!!" I didn't have the heart to tell them otherwise.

Then we suffered an American-style scare. A vehicle displaying the words FOR OFFICIAL BUSINESS ONLY pulled up and a uniformed National Park Service employee stepped out of it. What went through my mind was what goes through my mind whenever an encounter with a uniform is forced upon

me: *Oh, here we go*. To our stunned surprise, he was there neither to write tickets nor run us of. He said he'd read about our Booth visit in the newspaper and drove out to see what it was about. He was even good-natured enough to sign the copy of *Whipped Cream & Other Delights* I was having all this visit's participants sign.

This was our first contact with the new officialdom out there and to my great surprise, it wasn't bad. Like a mild case of crabs, it didn't last long and barely hurt at all I actually caught myself thinking, if only briefly, that maybe bureaucrats might not muck this up after all (My occasional sunny outlook cracks me up sometimes.) Of course, we didn't show him our decorative rock handiwork, soon to become a hilariously unfunny point of contention between bureaucrats and me.

The most ambitious project I'd lined up for this visit was to photograph the Booth from the air. I'd been wanting an aerial photo of the Booth all along and I wanted one all the more, now that we'd made a message visible, or so we supposed, from the air. It was possible to view the general area via satellite photos on the Internet but the Booth was not visible at the resolution grudgingly allowed to the general public.

I had considered just about every aerial photography method short of Leonard Knight's Holy Gospel Hot Air Balloon but everything was some combination of expensive, impractical, or likely to result in death or dismemberment lawsuits. The only semi-safe option I could think of was amateur rocketry. Specifically, a model rocket with a camera built into it. Of course, there'd be no way of aiming the camera, but if Las Vegas somehow became collateral damage, I'd just have to take a cue from the government's Nevada Test Site program and term that "acceptable risk."

Blizard

As I was about to remove the rocket from its packaging, there was a weirdly instant, oddly palpable drop in the ambient temperature, unlike anything I'd ever felt before. I can't say for sure whether such a thing is even possible, but I can tell you that all of us felt it. It was as if some desert god suddenly figured out the purpose of some giant cosmic button with a snowflake on it. We stopped what we were doing, looked around at each other the way people do in response to an earthquake, and said, "Did you feel that?"

Just as the temperature was taking its nosedive, Lara from Barstow's *Desert Dispatch* arrived. Then, from out of the sky, fell actual - what would one call them? flakes? made of some sort of frozen material? called *snow? Snowflakes*, I'm told they're called.

This was not good news for me. I've never been much of a frostbite enthusiast. I don't function well even in the mildly cold temperatures of a low-desert winter. Even worse, though, snow meant that our rocket launch window

had closed.

With the launch postponed, I had time to be interviewed by Lara. We all needed to get warm, so I went with Lara to her vehicle and everyone else piled into Krishna's rental car which they then parked with engine running and heater blasting right next to the Booth's doorless doorway. The Booth's phone kept ringing and as I answered Lara's questions I watched my friends take turns reluctantly getting out of the warm car and braving the cold to answer the phone.

"That was probably the most awesome visit," recalls the Professor. I don't know whether he's joking but the following excerpt from the Professor's trip notes describes a thing he did not think was so awesome. From Lara's vehicle I noticed that not every call was being answered. I noticed also that Lara had a cell phone with her. She said it might have a chance of grabbing a signal out there.

A reporter held an interview with Godfrey in her car whilst the rest of us dutifully answered calls. The snow got fluffier. One of the calls I took sounded like a crotchety old man.
I just wanted to check and see if you were at the booth, And I don't like your hat."
"Uh, okay."
And that green jacket is pretty ugly, too."
It was Godfrey, messing with me. The reporter flashed the lights on her vehicle. Ooooh, you bastard!" Heavy laughter at the other end of the cell phone. The call is dutifully logged:
Call #10: DUMBASS G.D.
I just wanted to see if you were still answering the phone."
"Not anymore, I'm not."

The sudden arrival of the cold front occurred more or less in concert with the arrival of another chilling natural phenomenon, Dr. Cliff, Evil Dentist. I met Cliff at Burning Man in 1997. He was a friend of my scientist pal Dr. Brody Culpepper. That was enough of a vouch for me to ship Wagner to Cliff for cross country photo hijinks on his drive from back East to Burning Man, where he served me cup after cup of homemade Anglo-Saxon mead, intentionally neglecting to mention, until I was about to puke prodigiously, that mead is meant be sipped like wine not guzzled like beer, unless one wants to puke prodigiously, or wants someone else to, which Cliff most certainly did.

Cliff isn't quite as evil as billed, but he definitely is kind of evil. Random example: in April 2005,I was sitting on the patio at The Columns Hotel in New Orleans with Cliff and Tex-Who-Had·Never-Been-to-Texas and we saw Sean Yseult, formerly of White Zombie. She and her band were either way too much into Anne Rice or else had a photo session scheduled because they were in full stage dress in the middle of the day. I pointed out that one of the band members seemed to have copped his entire look from Dave Navarro: hair, outfit, ink, facial hair, everything. Cliff said that, coincidentally, the previous evening after work he'd been drinking next to this very same

Navarro-looking guy at a bar. Cliff had come straight from the clinic and was still wearing his medical scrubs. With no provocation whatsoever, Cliff turned to the guy and said, "Hey, look at us. I'm dressed like a doctor, and you're dressed like a rock star." The guy nodded and smiled until Cliff added, "Except I really *am* a doctor." "Owwwww," said the musician. (Invite Dr. Cliff to your next party or holiday get-together!)

Physically, Cliff sort of resembles D-Day from *Animal House*. Like D-Day, he enjoys working on cars, although he has so far produced no Deathmobile (not technically, anyway). He's the kind of dentist who might tour Graceland while wearing a homemade ELVIS BLEW ME T-shirt and then reverse shoplift the shirt into The King's gift shop, or have himself photographed at Arlington National Cemetery so as to appear to be farting]FK's eternal flame. That kind of dentist. Evil, one might say. I can't disagree with an otherwise oblivious Booth article published after our next Booth visit that described Cliff as "quite possibly the happiest dentist in the Western Hemisphere." Another Booth article observed that "Cliff exudes such an over-the-top self-confidence that it seems like shtick until you get to know him." It's genuine, however improbable it seems, but no matter what he tries to tell you, he's really a good guy.

Soon after Cliff's arrival, we saw, through a thickening swirl of snowflakes, another pair of headlights in the distance. This was James, the Phoenix reporter who had been unsure whether my Mojave Phone Booth Project might be a prank. Well, he *had* first heard about it in an email he received on April Fool's Day and, as he would later ask, "who would trust a website with the tagline 'Laying the groundwork for an insanity plea since 1995' "? (Millions, James! *Millions* would!)

James was in search of a story, unaware he'd already gotten himself sucked into one. Welcome to the Booth Blizzard, there, Scoop.

After my second-ever live-at-the-Booth interview, which also was my second-ever live-in-a-snowstorm interview, I was again ready to talk to more callers. "Cliff took the next call," Cardyhouse says, "and as he passed the phone to Godfrey, he relayed the caller's [*alleged!*] sentiments: 'They said that we should keep doing things like this and that I'm better than you.' "

Meanwhile, the storm was doubling down on its snow bets to the point where I'd have wagered that the weather was intentionally employing the Martingale system. That light, pretty snowfall that had been dancing down onto our heads? This was no longer that. This was a driving snow moving almost parallel to the landscape. A blizzard, one might call it.

Small and shallow though our little band's pool of common sense may have been, it had become clear even to us that we had best get out of there, and quickly. It wouldn't be funny to get snowed in. Cold, we were prepared for. Well, some of us were. Rain, sure. Snow? We weren't set up for that.

It was lucky for me that Cliff had arrived just in time for the blizzard because I can barely tie a decent knot even when I can feel my fingers, which that late afternoon I could not. And I'm especially ineffective at knot-tying when I'm not tying knots at all because I'm instead continuing to freeze in the Booth answering phone calls. The others also delayed their packing efforts to take photos of each other in the falling snow. Or, more accurately, to take photos of each other taking photos of each other in the falling snow.

> All three of us packed as speedily as we could. It was a disorderly packing, as we could scarcely stand before the wind, and were almost blinded by the sand.
>
> - Edna Brush Perkins, *The White Heart of Mojave*

Replace *sand* with *snow* and "packed as speedily as we could" with "snapped photos like a pack of six-year-olds given their first cameras at a birthday party" and you have a good mental picture of the Blizzard at the Booth. Stranded atop Everest, minutes from death, our crew would probably be busy making legacy snow angels.

After probably half an hour, everyone was in vehicles except Dr. Cliff, who was still trying to tarp the bed of my truck for me, in between retreating back into his borrowed van every couple of minutes to restore feeling to his fingers, and yours truly, whose little mind's hobgoblin was a foolishly consistent unwillingness to let the phone go unanswered.

A few callers accused me of being a liar, now that the honest answer to the question "So, what's going on out there?" had become "A raging blizzard."

In the storm, the phone continues to ring. More strangers making phone calls to the moon:

- Holbrook calling, a trucker, leaving his phone number. "Call me up before I die," he says.

- Phoenix calling, an elderly woman, saying, "Well, I was sitting around and I was depressed about the world and I read about this in the paper and I just took heart. And I just wanted to tell you that."

That type of call is Daniels' favorite.

"I like when people call and express delight," he says. "They just like that somebody is doing this. 'That's really nice."

- From James Hibberd's *New Times* article, "Phone Alone"

We caucused quickly to decide which way to head on the freeway, optimistically assuming we'd be able to make it back to the freeway at all. In this travel-paralyzing weather, Baker was sure to have sold out its rooms to travelers on their way to or from Vegas, most of whom would be panicked Angelenos whose ability to drive washes away in even a light rain, never mind a blizzard. Besides, the Professor and I had personal experience of Baker's motel stock, and we regarded that as reason enough to head in the opposite direction. We decided to make a try for one of the casinos just over the Nevada state line.

Having spent my life in the Sonoran Desert, I haven't the slightest idea how to drive in winter conditions, so naturally it fell to me to take the lead of our caravan in my emphatically not-four-wheel drive pickup. We bugged out of there on those bumpity old dirt roads at about a 35 mph clip, snow hurtling parallel to the ground, straight at our windshields. The experience was made to feel even odder by the addition of Art Bell's radio show playing over my radio speakers.

It was kind of funny that it wasn't until we finally reached I-5 that we were forced to slow down. Westerners driving on the freeway were displaying all the signs of being what Easterners call "scared of a tiny bit of weather." We were therefore able to drive no faster than 10-20 miles per hour in thick traffic nearly the whole way to Nevada, where a pair of casinos press their extravagantly lit noses right up against the California border.

Whiskey Pete's Death Car

In the average crime show there are blowups of photos showing riddled gangsters, victims of lynchings and anything else the proprietor can get together and the public will stand for - which is considerable. A full-sized model of an electric chair or the actual bullet-perforated which some gang lord met his end would put a crime show in the very top brackets of its field.

- William Lindsay Gresham, *Monster Midway*

The Nevada settlement called Primm consists almost entirely of Buffalo Bill's Casino and Whiskey Pete's Casino. The latter is named after noted Mojave Desert bootlegger Pete McIntyre, which somehow makes it feel

appropriate that it is the final resting place of Bonnie & Clyde's Death Car and Clyde's Bloody Death Shirt and, for all I know, Clyde's Death Pack of Blackjack Chewing Gum. Bonnie & Clyde's Death Car works so well for Whiskey Pete's that it wouldn't surprise me if more than one casino had one, but the only Bonnie & Clyde's Death Car I've seen in person is the one at Whiskey Pete's. More importantly, to a person of my sensibility, Whiskey Pete's has the only Bonnie & Clyde's Death Car Squished Penny Machine I've seen. (Sadly, no Clyde's Bloody Shirt Squished Penny Machine.)

Waiting in the casino lobby, the Phone Boothers look like they're from another planet," James wrote in his article. "They seem strangely ecstatic and alive, whooping and cracking jokes to the unamused staff."

I don't know how we *wouldn't* have been ecstatic. We'd spent the day working on our idiosyncratic projects in a remote desert while talking to people around the world from the Mojave Phone Booth. We were still ecstatic in the casino probably because we hadn't yet had time to adjust to the fact that we were now merely in a casino. Cardyhouse said, "The difference between answering a ringing phone in the desert and waiting in line in a noisy, smoky casino is profound. I felt like an astronaut returning to earth after, you know, astronauting."

Casino buffet food represented enough of a gamble for me but for the others actual monetary gambling formats were required. At the end of his article, James poked some fun at me for not seeing the appeal.

> Daniels looks into the casino, frowning.
>
> "What is that noise?" he asks.
>
> It's the sound of money, the wonderful and never-coding siren song of the casino. A siren song that doesn't touch him. Daniels doesn't gamble, and skips breakfast the next morning. The lights, bells, whistles, coin droppings have no effect. There's only one bell he wants to hear, and probably still can, even in the casino. It's the sound of a phone ringing in the middle of a desert snowstorm. Somehow, the phone pays off for him.
>
> He looks at all the high-stakes revelry and shakes his head.
>
> "I don't understand why anybody would enjoy this."

For the record, I fully understand the appeal of casinos from the point of view of casinos. I just don't understand their appeal from the point of view of gamblers. To me casinos are just noisy. dark, and unpleasant. I'm in agreement with the late Marta Becket, of Death Valley's famous Amargosa Opera House, who pronounced it "exhausting just to walk through these casinos."

While my compadres gambled and drank and who knows what all, I went up to bed so as to be rested for the next morning's return to the Booth. Because hell yes, we were going to return to the Booth.

Rocket Winter

Rocket summer. The warm desert air changing the

frost patters on the windows, erasing the art work. The skis and sleds suddenly useless. The snow, falling from the cold sky upon the town, turned to a hot rain before it touched the ground.

- Ray Bradbury, *Martian Chronicles*

In the morning, it required neither ceremony nor starting gun to get us to put the casino behind us and the road back to the Booth in from of us, except for James, who headed back to Phoenix to write his article.

Some later asked why we returned to the Booth, which to me seems like a question only an insane person would even consider asking, but I suppose that

some people, having arrived at a casino, stay at the casino. What they do there is their business and no one else's.

But there were callers depending on us. And what in Wotan's name were we going to do at a casino all day long? Had we not already seen what there was to see of Bonnie & Clyde's Death Car?

Besides, someone had to take the Booth into the Rocket Age.

We had expected to find lots of snow left on the ground and maybe even on the Booth. Though it was still cold out, only small, scattered patches of white remained. Snow today, gone tomorrow. "Instant Weather," the Professor called it. We had expected to be building a snowman around the Booth. Instead our party did the best we could: a five-inch-tall snowman on the shelf inside the Booth, complete with a tiny carrot sliver for a nose.

It's a modern world, they say, and a modern world seems to be a world that doesn't really exist until someone has photographed it. Nowadays, to photograph the Booth and our PHONE message from above would be easy with any of multitudes of commercially available camera-bearing drones. This, however, was 1998, and 1998 demanded a camera-bearing model rocket launch - by me, a guy who had never heard of a camera-bearing model rocket until he called a hobby shop to ask whether such a thing even existed.

One has to make a few actual rocketry-related preparations to launch a rocket. I've heard some NASA employees even go to school to learn how, and even model rockets come with instructions. They aren't entirely non-dangerous. I knew a kid whose grade school science class was launching model rockets with nose cones they'd filled with ants. Because the kids apparently didn't RTFM, they improperly packed the rocket's parachute, which then failed to open. When the rocket plummeted back to earth nose cone first, the kid I knew tried to catch it He caught it, all right - with the bridge of his nose. On the bright side, he got a free ambulance ride, and a surgeon somewhere got a new cocktail party anecdote about the afternoon he spent digging ants out of some kid's face.

I told that anecdote at the Booth that day, both as a delaying tactic so I could RTFM and also as a cautionary tale as to why we *ought* to RTFM, because Cliff kept insisting that if we couldn't figure out how to launch a rocket without having to read about how to launch a rocket, then we weren't worthy to launch a rocket. To Dr. Cliff, *prepare for launch* means *gobble hummus* - and *from a can*, as if we were in space and had no choice but to eat crappy astronaut food. When the wind shifted, I got a full whiff, and I can't help but remember the stink to this day whenever I smell even good hummus. (Thanks, Cliff.)

After barely skimming the instructions we managed maybe half a dozen successful launches, several of them from atop the Booth itself. The aim of the camera was a matter of luck, of course, but it didn't matter anyway because we lost the rocket when it plummeted full-speed back to earth somewhere. Thanks to Cliff's manly disdain for the instruction manual, I'd been improperly packing its parachute all along. No noses were harmed, and I hope there were no ground casualties among the local ants. Dr. Cliff promised that for the next Booth trip it would be his turn to buy the camera rocket.

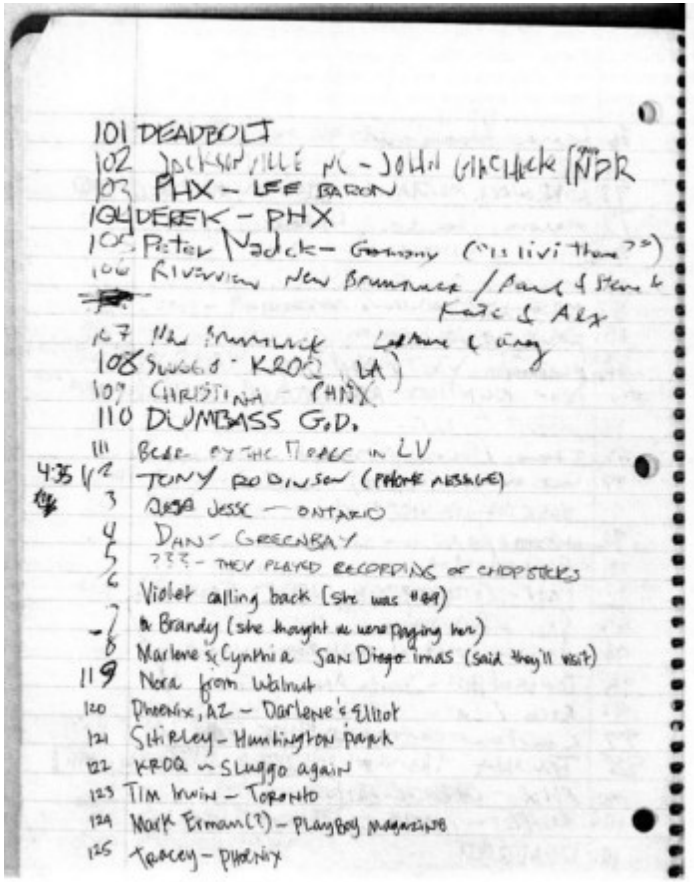
As we searched in vain for the crash-landing spot of the camera rocket, Dr. Cliff happened upon a spot just a little ways off the road where, decades before, the Booth installers had ditched the concrete left over from the pouring of the Booth's concrete foundation. The Dark Matter of the Booth universe! Ur-Booth!

Despite the weather, our projects, and the Great Blizzard Bugout of '98, the Booth still enabled us to speak to hundreds of people worldwide. Not all calls were logged or recorded, unfortunately. With so much going on, it was easy to forget to drink water or eat meals, let alone write down names or turn on a tape recorder.

Before driving away from the Booth, we took the customary last-minute photos and I left the now traditional dime and quarter in the phone's coin return as an offering to the Booth and possibly also as an aid to someone who might be stuck out there without coins to call for help. This time I was bringing up the rear of the caravan and stopped for one final snapshot of the again-deserted Booth.

I had predicted a dozen people would show up. We had numbered ten visitors in all (I'm including two reporters and a park ranger, after the fashion of small town welcome signs whose "Pop. 96" signs include dogs, cats, and Unitarians). Both Lara and James wrote nice pieces about us and the project. (The Arizona Press Club awarded James a prize for his.) Their articles stood out for being not only non-snide and non adversarial but even more importantly, participatory. They came out to meet us and tried to understand what kept bringing us out there. Had the Booth been a product I was selling (as many at the time advised me it should have been), I'd have thought, *Wow, you can't even buy publicity like that*. James well captured that moment at the casino. The masses had their entertainments, we had ours - for the time being,

that is. Within weeks, the masses would start massing at the Booth. And sadly, not all reporters would be like Lara and James.


101 DEADBOLT
102 Jacksonville FL - John Gilchrist [NDR
103 PHX - LEE BARON
104 DEREK - PHX
105 Peter Vadeck - Germany ("is livi there?")
106 Riverview New Brunswick / Paul & Steve &
Kate & Alex
107 New Brunswick Leanne & Amy
108 SLUGGO - KROQ (LA)
109 CHRISTINA - PHX
110 DUMBASS G.D.
111 BEER BY THE POOL IN LV
435 1/2 TONY ROBINSON (PHONE MESSAGE)
3 JESSE JESSE - ONTARIO
4 DAN - GREENBAY
5 ??? - THEY PLAYED RECORDING OF CHOPSTICKS
6 Violet calling back (she was #89)
7 & Brandy (she thought we were paging her)
8 Marlene & Cynthia San Diego Xmas (said they'll visit)
119 Nora from Walnut
120 Phoenix, AZ - Darlene & Elliot
121 Shirley - Huntington Park
122 KROQ w SLUGGO again
123 Tim Irwin - Toronto
124 Mark Erman(?) - PlayBoy Magazine
125 Tracey - Phoenix

NOTES

1 Someone emailed me in 2007 to tell me that the Lanfair phone had been removed.

2 That project had the chance neither to fruit nor fester because the bucket of glass was among the possessions stolen from my desert property in Arizona. I'd love to know what the thieves thought they were stealing when they stole a five-gallon bucket of broken safety glass.

3 Unbeknownst to me, my tape recorder would on this trip sustain moisture damage from snowflakes. Even when using a recorder the smart interviewer still takes notes on the conversation. I am not a smart interviewer. (Sorry about that, Ms. March.)

4 See Mountain Monogrnms at DcuceOfClubs.com/mts.

MEDIA BLIZZARD

> I don't know why anyone ever talks to the pros, for any reason whatsoever. The pres, is like a lamprey that latches onto a subject and just suds and suds and sucks until your brain and your soul are as dry as a crouton. Because they need what you've got inside you to make their story. And they don't care anything about you. 'They care about their story.
>
> - Stephen Cobert

With due respect to Mr. Colbert, I can happily report that many good and even beautiful things came about that otherwise would not have if the media had never picked up the Booth story. In addition, I encountered some reporters who were genuinely decent human beings and a pleasure to deal with.

Having said that, I can't altogether disagree with Colbert's pronouncement. Honestly, real-life newspaper reporting can sometimes make *His Girl Friday* look like a documentary. It can be a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the mass media.

You might be thinking this is just a personal hobgoblin of mine, but you'll find that it comes up again and again when one reads about the ethics of journalism (as opposed to journalist ethics). It's not uncommon for reporters themselves to wrestle with the ethics of their profession.

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that

what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity. ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse.

- Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*

A writer is always going to betray somebody.

- Pulitzer Prize winner Ted Morgan

Journalism is a weird confidence game. It's actually indefensible in many ways. You don't want to give people a second chance to think about things that they inadvertently said. There are times when, *I'm really pleased that you said that to me on the record, and I really don't want to flag it to you.*

- Brian Doherty, *Reason* magazine (from an interview at DeuceOfClubs.com)

I wondered if Brother Carl knew then about the inevitable treachery that stood between journalist and subject. I wondered if he was ready for the dance that would have to take place between him and me.

- Dennis Covington, *Salvation and Mountain*

Long before the Booth Project, I had already been the subject of media stories regarding various other subjects. When the media began to bear down on me, I believed I was ready for that dance.

I was nowhere near ready for that dance.

I didn't recognize it at the time, but the Booth phenomenon was the occasion of my mass media baptism. I had already undergone minor media sprinklings in the past. But this was different. This was instead like the Southern Baptist baptism of my youth. This was full immersion.

Multitudes today are willing, even desperate, to do almost anything to attract a media spotlight, any media spotlight They'll happily appear on TV reality shows knowing full well they'll likely be made to look like fools, which they might in fact be, if they value attention more than dignity.

Others find being depicted in the media to be always weird and often less than pleasant. Unless you 're some sort of narcissist, the overarching feeling of being portrayed is that it's uncomfortable and kind of creepy. When it happens to you for the first time, you probably don't give enough thought to the fact that it will be only a portrayal, which makes it more than likely that you will barely recognize yourself in it. Even the most faithful portrait is still an abstraction, and abstractions, being only representations and not the things themselves, are to some degree inescapably distortive.[1]

One of the oddest things about the experience is that you rarely know where you stand with a reporter. While in college, I worked for an eccentric architect who was the subject of a *60 Minutes* story. It was a bizarre process to watch. I learned that reporters tend to be nice to your face, no matter whether they intend to salute you or savage you. As it turned out, the story in question was a hatchet piece. The architect wasn't a crook, so it was in no way a necessary investigative piece. It was just a slam. Even so, in a way it wasn't

completely undeserved, so I thought it was kind of funny, with the funniest part coming afterward, in the letter the architect fired off to Morley Safer to protest the unflattering portrayal, which he capped with my all-time favorite sign-off: "I sue you in effigy for a million dollars!"[2]

Then there's the matter of facts. A certain general unreliability of news accounts is often remarked upon and is even part of folk knowledge yet although we in modern societies are often called "media savvy," most of us as consumers of media stories but rarely if ever the subject of one, aren't as savvy about this process as we like to think. Until you 're involved with an incident or activity that draws media attention, you probably don't know how large a role fiction can play in reporting. I sure didn't, until after a car crash I was involved in on my 19th birthday. The collision occurred within a few blocks of the local newspaper's offices, yet its article had our names wrong, ages wrong, and assigned people's names to the wrong vehicles. They did correctly note the intersection where the accident occurred, so, points for that, I guess.

I'd had paper routes as a kid, but until that crash I hadn't understood the nature of the information I had been delivering to my customers' doorsteps.

> Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed.
>
> - George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War"

Andrew of BeNiceToBears.com once told Professor Cardyhouse, "I think EVERYONE in America should get interviewed for a few articles and then read what actually comes out. That would be the best way of educating people about how the media actually works." While I'd love to believe that would do the trick, I suspect we would still keep trusting media stories anyway, a troubling phenomenon the late Michael Crichton termed the Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect.[3]

I found it discouraging to see how few reporters managed even merely to accurately write down what I said. Sometimes they even flat-out made up things I never said at all. This was especially the case, for some reason, concerning how I made my living, something reporters never failed to grill me about. I've always considered that question weird from anyone other than a prospective employer. I know it's considered a normal question and that people ask it more or less automatically when meeting others, but to me it seems bizarre. Unless a person, say, kills vampires professionally, I find that asking how they pay for their food and shelter is the question that usually elicits the least interesting information about them.

What I did for money at the time wasn't data entry, but it fell far short of

actual programming, and definitely was not at all interesting to talk about, even had I cared to. I therefore always responded to the question, "And what do you do?" by saying things along the lines of, "Computers, like everyone else."

Strangely, almost magically, the more articles about the Booth that appeared, the smarter and more accomplished I got. With no effort on my part I became a "computer consultant," "computer programmer," "computer entrepreneur," "computer specialist," computer expert," "computer executive," "computer wizard." Someone even called me a "computer genius." Take a look at my website's ancient and ineptly hand-coded HTML sometime - if that says "genius" to you, you obviously know even less HTML than I do, if that's even possible.

It was the kind of information degradation one sees in that game children play called the Telephone Game, which was irksome even if thematically appropriate. Even the simple fact of my place of residence, Arizona, was misreported. The fact was available right on my website yet media accounts claimed I was from California, Nevada, even Seattle (probably because Girl Trouble lives in Tacoma). Many articles made me doubt they'd even recorded the interview.

Other articles made me wish that *I* had recorded the interview. There's a common saying, "Never trust a reporter." I wouldn't say "never" but will say that *definitely* whenever a reporter promises that *anything* will stay "off the record," *do not trust that reporter*. I know Woodward kept his word to Deep Throat, and every now and again reporters will even accept jail time rather than give up a protected source, and I salute people like that. But that's not the way to bet when you 're dealing with one. Both in connection with the Booth and in previous, non· Booth-related instances, *every single time*. I've ever answered a reporter's question with their express and explicit agreement that we had an "off the record" understanding, they went ahead and quoted me anyway. No exaggeration. *Every. Single. Time*.

One could say it was my fault for running my yapper anywhere near a reporter. One could ask the same question of me if I had put my head in a crocodile's mouth: *What as I thinking?*

Well, as I said before, in the ease of the Booth's first media appearance, I was mostly thinking it was funny, especially because it was in the much-venerated *New York Times*. I thought Id scored a media hit," a small bit of subversion, a microscopic pinprick in the media bubble. And to be honest, though I doubted it would, I hoped it might bring a few more eyeballs to Deuce of Clubs.

What I should have focused on were the media's eyeballs because they were now focused on me. The media bubble was no longer just floating in

front of me. It was now behind me and above me and beneath me and all around me - in short, I was now *in the bubble*. I had fancied myself a culture jammer - a minor one, but still. But I was wrong. I hadn't hacked mass media. Mass media had hacked *me*.

Of course, writing a (putatively) non-fiction book will teach anyone who didn't already know it that some amount of inaccuracy is inevitable in any work containing propositional content, especially where memories of decades-old events are involved. That shouldn't make one despair of knowing anything at all, but it should encourage varying levels of scepticism toward every piece of writing, including the one you're reading right now.

One form of media I found I sometimes enjoyed doing was live radio. With print or taped interviews, I never knew how my words would be represented, or misrepresented, in the final product. Live radio meant I could speak directly to people and as long as I remembered not to use any expletives, no one would stop me or edit me or distort my words.

Even when it was clear that the host or hosts wanted only to make fun of me - or, to be honest, if I just got bored of repeating the same story - I would find ways to amuse myself, such as assigning myself words to work into the conversation. Given how much nonsense media pumps into the world, I figured it couldn't be all that wrong to give out a little molasses in return. My friend TradeMark G of the Evolution Control Committee told me he'd been "collecting samples with 'pants' or 'toast' in them, and if you could use both in one sentence or just in the interview, that would be superswell." Phil requested that I say the word *Qeequeg*. (Thanks a bunch, Phil.) Bob Sokol asked me to tug on my left earlobe, which of course I did, as far as he knows. In response to the usual question - "So ... why a phone booth?" - I worked *Qeequeg, pants,* and *toast* into a single sentence. Very proud moment for an English major, let me tell you.

A Most Curious Effect of the Blizzard; or, From "Get a life!" to "Gimme directions!"

> We became a fashion in the usual way - we were written about in the *New Yorker*. The first week or two at the Blue Angel, nobody much laughed at us. But when *The New Yorker* came out, how they laughed. We were horrified. We didn't know such things were possible. We'd just been in Chicago, where people laughed if it was funny; if it wasn't they didn't. We had

to be approved, accredited. Once they said we were like the Lunts, they laughed when we came out onstage.

- Mike Nichols, of Nichols & May

Before the media blizzard the Booth website seemed to attract a modest number of fun and interesting people, crowds of "You have too much time on your hands" people, and not a whole lot in between. But after millions of people began hearing about the Booth through the media, It attracted attention not only from loads more people who would have responded to it anyway if they'd heard about it sooner but also from some who by their own admission were ordinarily not interested in "off-beat" things. Among some of this latter group the Mojave Phone Booth became interesting by a sort of ratification process, by acquiescence in the media's sanctification of it, rendering it socially "safe" to be delighted by it. The media attention was like an All Clear signal to the naysayers I'd been used to hearing from, letting them know it was now acceptable to be amused and maybe even amazed by the Booth.

Before the Booth got famous, I had a small scan on Deuce of Clubs of part of a map of the Mojave Desert showing the Booth's location. It had never occurred to me that anyone other than my friends and I would ever want to trek into the Mojave to visit it, so I had thought of it less as a map than as a decorative feature. Now, though, having read about the Booth in a newspaper or heard about it on the radio or seen it on television, people would write to ask where, exactly, the Booth was. Thus was "Get a life!" transformed almost overnight into "Gimme directions!"

What an odd coincidence it was, that the same sort of people who hadn't been able to get enough of telling me how dumb my Mojave Phone Booth Project was were suddenly becoming interested in the Booth at *exactly the same time* the media did. It was a powerful lesson as to why they call it *mass* media.

I don't mean to sound cynical about it. It was good to see that people could open their eyes to find that something they had thought was merely stupid was maybe also kind of fun. I did give people directions, at first, but I also offered many unasked-for cautions about desert travel and so forth.

On the Internet scorn and praise about the Booth Project were still sometimes oddly combined. While some of it had the same flavor, it was now more common to detect a new attitude among the insults, extending almost to admiration.

This guy is a fucking nutcase. He and his fiends drive out to a phone booth in the middle of the fucking Mojave Desert and camp there while people from all over the world call the phone booth to talk to them. Now why didn't I think of that?

An important lesson the Booth taught me was that if you glance away for a moment, a project can get away from you and start mutating. An even more important lesson, one harder to learn, was that this is not necessarily a bad

thing. In retrospect it is of course obvious and 100% unsurprising that people would want to visit the Booth. Wasn't I having fun doing it? Near the end of the Booth's life, Shannon McKinnon, a reporter who had written one of the better articles about the Booth phenomenon, wrote, "From your POV it must feel like your project has been co-opted by the masses. It's funny - there are people who spend billions of dollars trying to sell something to society and fail miserably. And then there are people like yourself who hit on something that penetrates the public consciousness almost instantly.

It *was* odd, for me, for a while there. My Booth Project suddenly had for me a kind of alien component that was at first a little tough for me to think about and absorb, let alone explain. You know that weird feeling when suddenly everyone has "always liked" that band you actually have always liked and there's no logical reason you can think of that justifies being annoyed about it and *yet?* Maybe it was kind of like that. I'm not proud to say it was. But it was. My Mojave Phone Booth Project seemed to be turning into an open source project. I was not yet a fully convinced open source fan and was not entirely comfortable with the developing state of affairs regarding the Booth's renown. I had to learn to open myself up to a new view of it. Just as former Booth disparagers had to learn to see it as something fun and even interesting, I had to learn to see it as a public obsession rather than just a private one. Eventually I arrived at the realization that anyone probably ought to who initiates something odd, as did Greg Hill about Disoordianism:

> It is my present pleasure to announce that your Polyfather has achieved a new level of consciousness and is consequently able to relieve the Discordian Society of an unfortunate pox, that is, the remnants of a young man's fear, who some ten years ago began to co-conceive the Society & fancied that it was *his* thing. (1969 letter reproduced in the *Historia Discordia*)

I recently saw some videos of an interesting occurrence at a music festival. In contrast to spectators who sat passively listening to the music, one guy off to the side started dancing a goofy kind of a dance, all by himself. People began to notice him and laugh at him. But then a stranger walked over and started dancing with him. Then another. Then a couple more. Then three more. Then, almost in an instant, dozens of former spectators, doubtless including some mockers, began running over to join in, until it became a huge dance party, hundreds of people all dancing, and all of them having more fun than they were having before.

It took me longer than it should have to learn to think of the Mojave Phone Booth as similar to that lone, goofy dancing guy.

NOTES

1 Interviewers are courteous and gentle-mannered, even when they come to destroy. I must not be understood to mean that they ever come consciously to destroy or are aware afterward that

they have destroyed; no, I think their attitude is more that of the cyclone, which comes with the gracious purpose of cooling off a sweltering village, and is not aware, afterward, that it has done that village anything but a favor. - Mark Twain, "Concerning the 'Interview'

2 We may as well face up to the fact that all journalism, particularly investigative reporting (but not exempting essay, such as this one) involves snitching on other people. - Ron Rosenbaum, "Confession Fever," in James Monaco, *Celebrity*

3 "The Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect is as follows. You open the newspaper to an article on some subject you know well. In Murray's case, physics. In mine, show business. You read the article and see the journalist has absolutely no understanding of either the facts or the issues. Often, he article is so wrong it actually presents the story backward - reversing cause and effect. I call these the 'wet streets cause rain' stories. Paper's full of them. In any case you read with exasperation or amusement the multiple errors in a story, and then turn the page to national or international affairs, and read as if the rest of the newspaper was somehow more accurate about Palestine than the baloney you just read. You turn the page. and forget what you know.

"That is the Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect. I'd point out it does no operate in other arenas of life. In ordinary life, if somebody consistently exaggerates or lies to you, you soon discount everything they say. But when it comes to the media, we believe against evidence that it is probably worth our time to read other parts of the paper. When, in fact it almost certainly isn't. The only possible explanation for our behavior is amnesia. " - Michael Crichton. lecture, April 26, 2000

BOOTHOGRAPHY IV

POPULARITY

The Booth had sat quietly in the Mojave Desert for decades, like a dormant volcano. It hadn't been dormant from the point of view of Lorene Caffee and her family, of course, but no one could have predicted the coming eruption of attention nor its magnitude. In hindsight it was almost like a paradisiacal South Seas isle, stumbled across by explorers, that would soon be swarmed by sailors.

After the initial contact with Lorene, I was still calling every day. But though other people managed to catch Lorene during her calls, I didn't seem to be able to.

Doc: When was the next time you remember picking up the phone?
Lorene Caffee: Oh, gee, I don't know. Who told us that there was a website?Tony [Domingo, Lorene's nephew]?
Doc: I was hoping you'd pick up again. I'd call every day thinking, *Well, sooner or later she's got to make some more calls*. I used to get emails from people saying, "Oh my god! I just called and Lorene answered!"
Lorene: That's funny.
Doc: I'd say, *I hope you said hi for me*. Were you ever up at the mine and saw people down at the Booth and went down there?
Lorene: Oh, yeah. We could look out our bedroom window.
Doc: You never came down there when I was out there.
Lorene: I didn't know it was you. The only time I can remember talking to you after that - out there - was when you called and there were a whole

bunch of people there that day -
Doc: I think maybe that was New Year's Eve [1999-2000]. I didn't have any other way to get ahold of you.
Lorene: We had to go by that Phone Booth when we hauled water. I really don't remember when I heard it ringing again or when I answered it again. It happened pretty fast.
Terry Caffee: The whole thing mushroomed.
Bob Ray: When we went down, a lot of times, it would be ringing off the wall. It was people calling just to see whether it really existed or not, you know. You can imagine what it would cost to call from London, England, or from Japan! A lot of times it would ring when you drove up.
Lynn Mcintire: There were times when Lorene and Terry were out of town and my husband and I were out [at the mine] by ourselves. So there would be times when we'd go over to use the Booth and it would ring and, like I said, I had a call from Paris one time and another one from Germany. Sometimes people would call and be so surprised that somebody answered that they'd just hang up! They wouldn't even say anything. They'd just hangup.
Robin Storti: I remember my family talking about it and my mom telling me, "Hey, I talked to this guy at the Phone Booth." I said, "You mean that Phone Booth that's out there? That's still out there?" I said, "Oh. That's weird. He actually called you?" Who knew that it would turn into what it turned into?
Carrie (Ray) Heintzen: I didn't even realize anybody even thought that was interesting until I kind of ran across it when I was looking at something regarding the mine.
Lorene: All of the time that all of these computer things and everything was really getting going, that was when we were at the mine and had no power.
Robin: You know when you would publish a question [for Lorene] and I would answer it? My mother never knew I was doing that.
Doc: Really? I thought you were calling her and getting her answers!
Robin: No. She lived at the mine. It was too hard at the time. Months would go by and I wouldn't talk to her because they lived that life out there. Sometimes the cell phone worked, sometimes it didn't.
Doc: You could've called the Phone Booth and caught her, hit-or-miss, like I did.
Robin: Maybe! One of her friends had printed out your whole website for her to see and when she saw all these answers she said, "Robin, are you the one who gave those answers?" I said, "Yes" and she thanked me. To be in touch with her at that time, it would've taken way too long to get back to you with the answers. I just gave the answers that I thought she would say.
Doc: Isn't it weird how this has all turned out?

Robin: Very, very strange, indeed. What a phenomenon!
Carrie: I stumbled across Deuce of Clubs and went, *What in heck is this?* I stared reading it all and it was absolutely hilarious. Where *was* I? It's hilarious! You know what I got the biggest kick out of, I think? All the little activities that went on after that, like that little swimming pool and all that. I laughed really hard. The gal that sent that to you - she was hilarious! You really tickled my funny bone when I was reading about all the times you called, trying to get ahold of somebody. And then, lo and behold, my aunt Lorene answers the phone! Knowing her personality - she doesn't get excited, you know, she's very dry all the time - and then to read the conversation, and knowing her? I was cracking up! She doesn't get excited, and you're all "WOW!" and everything. [*Laughs*]

And what did matriarch Fay think when she heard of all the interest in her Phone Booth?

Fay Ray: Well ... we thought it was unusual.
Terry: I never thought a whole lot about it. *Many* people have asked me, What do you think about all this?" you know, and - I don't know, what do you say? I don't expound too much on things. I just kinda take things as they go, without analyzing it. One thing that I did enjoy was meeting the people who have become our friends like Bob [Bendig] and Kaarina [Roberto] and Derek [Roberto]. We don't make friends easily. At least, I don't. A person that becomes friends with me is somebody who is special and unique. I've always been kind of a loner all my life.
Robin: I think they both [Lorene and Terry] kind of went, "Oh, I don't know," and then realized, "Hey, this is pretty fun!" I think they liked the notoriety.
Doc: Terry really liked talking on the phone.
Robin: Yes, he did, which amazed me, 'cause he's a hermit.
Charlie Wilcox: I've had a lot of fun out there. I've always enjoyed it. In real life, I don't like telephones. I won't have a telephone.
Doc: So many people who loved the Booth don't ordinarily answer their phones: Terry, Charlie, Kaarina, Bob Bendig, me.
Robin: I don't like the phone much either. But the exciting part was you never knew who you were going to talk to, and it really didn't matter. It was just a connection to a person or place you never would probably see or hear from but the beauty of it is that you could. It was weird.
Doc: Was there any time when you were driving by the Booth and it was ringing and you didn't answer it?
Lorene: Terry thought I was nuts because if it was ringing when we were going to get water or coming or going for any reason, I wanted to stop and answer it.
Terry: We could stay there for two or three hours, you know?
Doc: Tell me about it!

Terry: People get on that sucker, they didn't want to get of!
Lorene: We were coming back from somewhere. We'd been boondocking- I think it was when we came back across from Kelso - we took back roads all the way back, and it was eight or nine o'clock at night and it was ringing. And I said, "Terry, you gotta stop." And he said, "You're nuts." And I said, "Nope. You gotta stop and answer the phone. If it's ringing, you gotta answer it." Well, that was his downfall. He answered the phone and it was some gal from Japan.
Terry: I must've talked to her for I don't know how long.
Lorene: She could hardly speak English, and you could tell that what she was doing was looking in her dictionary while she was talking to him. Talked for a long time. That hooked him, though, when he got that call from that gal. And about the third time she called, he said, "You must be very wealthy." And she couldn't quite understand what he meant, so he said, "Rich. Lots of money," because she called and talked for an hour or whatever and then she'd call right back. That hooked him.

It was important to me, and gratifying to know, that my friends and I and readers of DeuceOfClubs.com weren't the only ones having fun with the Booth's new popularity. The people who had known and used the Booth as part of their lives now had the chance to see it in a new light and have fun with it, and they did. These desert people love their Mojave Desert, just as I love my Sonoran Desert, so it was an interesting, and I think fulfilling, experience for them to have people be interested in them and in what lives were like out on their desert. Here's this Phone Booth that Lorene's father put in and they'd never given it two seconds' thought before, but through a bizarre series of random occurrences it becomes world-famous. Recontextualization can be an odd thing, indeed.

At a certain point the Booth project took on a momentum all its own and splintered off in many different directions as more pcople got interested in it. From a project to make a phone ring and possibly talk to someone it became a worldwide phenomenon.

Robin: It became bigger than you, out of your hands. You created something that got bigger than you.
Doc: It got distressing because I suspected the NPS would eventually step in.
Robin: There's not much you could have done to stop it. It was out of your hands. That is the phenomenon. That something so simple that *you* did caused such a worldwide phenomenon that one of the major powers of the world actually had to react to you. How many people get to say that?

Charlie was another desert hermit suddenly enjoying his time in a new son of sun. The Booth hubbub turned this semi-hermit into a temporary celebrity,

and Charlie loved every moment of it, appearing on television and in articles all over the world, keeping a scrapbook of photos and Booth mementos and daily using the Booth's phone to talk to people across the globe.

No one but Charlie has any idea how many people he pulled out of the sand or gave a ride or water to. Charlie's scrapbook has one photo after another of people he helped.

Doc: I wonder how many times you drove out to the Booth while all this was going on?
Charlie: Oh, I'd go five, six times a day. Everybody'd go past the house. And I'd have to go out and see, well, did they make it or didn't they make it? I'd go to the top of the hill, there - where you'd go back into hard dirt - if they wasn't anywhere in the sand, I'd turn around. I'd go back home again.
Doc: You were like the guardian angel.
Charlie: I kept my eye on 'em.
Doc: I heard from a lot of people who told me you pulled their fat out of the fire.
Charlie: Yeah, I got a lot of letters, pictures of them being pulled out. Even the television crew that went out there - I had to pull them out.
Doc: The *NBC Nightly News* crew?
Charlie: Yeah.
Doc: It's funny how many people will come out to the desert with no water, no food, thinking they're just gonna dance in and dance out of there.
Charlie: Yeah! They figure there's pavement all the way, I guess. We always told them to use four-wheel drive only to get out there. Right before people stared calling this one, something in the newspaper had a [different] "Loneliest Phone Booth." But it was right on the pavement. They showed about four or five cars, settin' and waitin' for it. If it's paved, it's not a lonesome phone booth! Out *here's* a lonesome Phone Booth!

Not everyone was delighted, of course. As I interviewed Charlie, his wife Rena seemed bemused.

Doc: When all this Booth stuff was going on, what were you thinking about it?
Charlie: She really didn't think much of it.

I wish my voice recorder had instead been a camera, to catch the expression on Rena's face.

Doc: You'd see the people come in, they'd stop at the store on their way out, wouldn't they?

Rena Wilcox: Oh, yeah.
Doc: Did they ask you where it was?
Rena: I'd get Charlie and tell him, *Get down here!*
Charlie: She'd call me on the radio.
Doc: You didn't think much of it, though. Why is that?
Rena: I don't know.
Doc: You didn't like it or just weren't one way or the other about it?
Rena: It just didn't interest me that much. It's a stupid phone booth!
Charlie: It *was* just a shot-up phone booth.
Doc: But it was in the middle of nowhere.
Rena: [*Long pause*] So... ?
Doc: What if you went out there and there was a Walmart? It'd be all out of place. You'd think that was weird, yeah?
[*Charlie is laughing*]
Rena: Yeah?
Doc: So there's a phone booth. It makes people think, What's *that* doing out there?
Rena: It's there for the people around here! Now if you'd asked me this twenty-four years ago, I probably could have told you. But to me it didn't mean nothin'.
Doc: Do you think that if you lived in a city -
Rena: I'm from a small town. Bath, New York.
Doc: Okay, if you'd heard about the Booth back when you were in Bath, do you think you would've thought it was strange?
Rena: No.
Doc: Wouldn't have called it?
Rena: No.
Doc: Just to see if anybody would answer?
Rena: No.

(Charlie, at this point, was completely cracking up in the background)

Rena: I wouldn't waste my money! You crazy?
Doc: If nobody answers, it doesn't cost you anything.
Charlie: I answered many a time.
Rena: I'd probably have gotten HIM!

Rena finally laughs, too. Charlie picks up his scrapbook again and talks about meeting the singer who came all the way from Germany to sing opera to people calling the Mojave Phone Booth.

Doc [to Rena]: You don't think that's cool? Getting to meet people from all over the world?
Rena: I get people down here at the gas station from all over the world.
Doc: It's a different context, though.

Rena: Nope. They're sill idiots. [*Laugh*] Don't mind me.
Doc: Rena, do you think I'm an idiot? Tell me the truth.
Rena: ...
Professor Cardyhouse: Pause!
Rena: You do your thing, that's all that matters.
Doc: But you don't see any interest in it? What about Nanette, the one who owns the store?
Rena: I don't know.
Doc: What'd she say to you?
Rena: I've never talked to her about it.
Doc: No? Not even when it was going on?
Rena: Didn't bother me.
Doc: Your husband was hanging out at the Booth, doing stuff, meeting people.
Rena: It was his thing. So let him do his thing.
Charlie: I enjoyed going out there. It was nice and quiet out there, too. You could just sit out there in the quiet.

When the phone wasn't ringing, that is!

"LIVES WILL BE CHANGED BECAUSE OF THIS. YOU KNOW."

On June 2,1999, I received an email from Andrea in Manhattan.

> Subject: 760.733.9969
> Yeah, it's on the speed dial of every damn phone we own.
> Call from home in the morning.
> Call from the cell phone walking down the street.
> You know the routine.
> So, Godfrey, you've made a pretty wonderful site about this booth! I sent the URL to my sister and she freaked, said she had a photo of the two of you together. Don't get scared.

Honestly, I was a little scared until she forwarded to me an email her sister sent her to explain the circumstances.

> one of the funny things about godfrey is that be never allows himself to be photographed. the picture i have is of mona and some other guy each with a hand covering godfrey's face between them. it is an odd photo.

I didn't remember the photo, but I did remember Andrea's sister, Laurie, whom I happened to meet at a rural Texas gas station when both our art cars were on the way to Houston for the 1998 an car parade.
Andrea continued:

> She and I are heading out to the Mojave booth the first weekend in July. I'm coming out from New York City, she from Telluride.
>
> Who's come the farthest to make a call, do you know? If we're able to assume same mystical mantle for the distance of our voyage, we'd love to know.
>
> Thanks for your great site and for inspiring such rabid silliness. Lives will be changed

because of this. you know.
All my best, and maybe we'll see you out there on the 5th!

Lives will be changed because of this, you know. I didn't know how right Andrea would prove to be about that. Neither did Andrea, even though the Booth would end up helping to change her life maybe the most dramatically of anyone's. Who'd believe a phone booth could be the beating butterfly wings that might cause a tornado in Kansas, or personal upheaval in Manhattan?

At the time, though, the Booth's wings weren't beating at all. The Booth number had been giving a solid busy signal for days. Even though the Booth's line was busy much of the time from people dialing it, one could usually get it to ring if one were persistent or obsessed.

I phoned Pacific Bell and learned that the Booth's phone was out of order. I noted the situation on the Booth's website and suggested that folks might want to give Pac Bell a ring to encourage them to fix the phone ASAP. That probably didn't turn out to be appreciated by Pac Bell employees, who were deluged by callers from around the world who were missing their daily Booth fix. This new Booth community that had sprung up sometimes felt like a small town that happened to be the size of a planet.

Andrea was more anxious than anyone that the Booth's phone be fixed, wanting it to be operational during her upcoming visit "They probably just say, 'in the next 24 hours' to everyone who calls," she wrote. "God, I hope they fix it in the next few weeks. I'd still go, of course, but little sister claims that it would be pointless to make the trip if the phone is broken. No matter. I'll annoy them into fixing it. I'm calling every hour now."

Pac Bell employees gave various answers, each claiming to be definitive, as to when the phone would be fixed. Usually, "today" - where "today" meant, in succession, the 7th of June, the 8th, the 9th, and the 10th. On the morning of the 11th, I finally heard the Booth's line ring again. I kept calling throughout the day, just to reassure myself. I'm sure Andrea did too. I was relieved to know that when I heard a busy signal, it once again meant not that the phone was down but only that someone else was ringing its number. Just as relieved, I'll bet, were Pac Bell employees. Strangers reported the Booth's renewed health to me, the most excited report coming from Andrea.

WOODAMN!
I just tried a few times and it was the same deal - busy, busy, then it rang!
Who's gonna go out there to see if it's really working?
I guess I am. ;-)

Unfortunately, someone wanted to meet us out there who could put Andrea's plans in jeopardy.

I'm a reporter for [*redacted]* ... a TV station which, in my mind, has one redeeming value ... management lets me travel away from the beaten path.
Had been thinking about doing a piece on Baker's thermometer and then stumbled onto your site.
Now I think maybe we can pitch a couple of more items.
What else can you tell me about the phone booth? Is there a number for Mr. CASE OF BEER?

It did not require a reporter's instincts to size up this reporter. A person who regards Baker's thermometer as "off the beaten path" - it sits in the middle of a town right beside one of the most-traveled stretches of freeway in the entire West, connecting Los Angeles with Las Vegas - is exactly the kind of person who would write "Mr. CASE OF BEER," employing that familiar "tone of jovial, half-chuckling banter which is the curse of newspaper writing" (and has been since at least 1860, when that complaint appeared in *The Cornhill Magazine*).

Because of my growing apprehension over how the new layer of officialdom in the Mojave might react - or more likely overreact - to all the commotion in what they now regarded as their exclusive domain, I had been trying to think of ways to push the brake pedal on the Booth's renown. At the same time, I felt pressured to cooperate with reporters because when I didn't, others did. There were already a number of copycat-type Booth sites and, as we discussed earlier, there exist people who will jump, some of them literally, at almost any chance to have their faces or names appear in any form of mass media whatsoever.

My provisional solution was to trick myself into thinking that media coverage might mean that at least I could get in a word about Lorene's family's developing troubles with the newly interloping Feds. I therefore told the "CASE OF BEER" reporter that I was willing to be interviewed on camera but would not allow my face to be televised. Instead, I would wear a bandanna. Safe enough for Subcommandante Marcos, safe enough for me, I figured.

"Oh, you can't do *that*!" he told me, and issued what he considered an ultimatum: no face, no story.

I instantly agreed that no story was probably best, which seemed to nonplus him. Those who work in TV aren't used to people turning down offers to be on TV. I'd already declined many times and it was always funny to gauge the reaction. Tell a reporter you don't want to be on TV and they conclude that you must be some fugitive baby shaker or some such.

My view was that whatever fame was associated with the Booth phenomenon belonged not to me, personally, but first to the Booth and second to the Cima Mine and their struggle against the National Park bureaucrats. And anyway, there is so little left of genuine privacy in this, our land of loudly advertised liberty that I therefore do what little I'm allowed to do in order to preserve what little is left of mine.

The draw of the Booth was strong, however. The reporter decided it might just be possible after all to do a story about a remote telephone booth without any contributions from my identifiable facial features. He asked whether there'd be anyone else visiting the Booth who would be willing to appear on camera. Maybe ill-advisedly, I gave him the URL of Andrea's new website devoted to her upcoming Booth trip. I thought that since this visit was

Andrea's doing, she'd be a better spokesperson for the effort, anyway. Besides, she had never been to the desert and had been reading up on the Mojave and was all geeked about it. Even so, she turned out to be ambivalent about taking part in TV coverage, which I took as a sign of good character.

The reporter wanted to arrive first to get shots of the isolated Booth. Understandable, but Andrea too wanted to pull up to an isolated Booth, not to some camera crew shoving a microphone into her face.

> IF the stories of magic and silliness can be shared WITHOUT negatively impacting our own experience, I guess I'm OK. If people can hear about you, the booth, everything around it ... and if it makes them smile and think about phone booths of their own, and maybe find a freedom they were lacking in their lives, what more could anyone ask? If it's presented in a boneheaded sort of way, unimaginative to the point that it turns the booth into Disneyland because people - just don't get it -, I'm scared and ashamed.

After due consideration, Andrea reached a decision. "If he's there when we arrive, I will not speak with him under any circumstances."

Concerns over media tomfoolery aside, I was enjoying Andrea's excited anticipation over meeting a desert for the first time. So many people fail to appreciate deserts or even assume they're dull. Not Andrea. She was amped.

> I have never been anywhere near anything resembling a desert. I may as well be going to the moon. I may simply burst with excitement when I see the Mojave for the first time. Be warned: I'll probably burst into tears. I'm by no means an emotional wreck - in fact, I've been told that I'm annoyingly distant and aloof - but I am so easily moved by strange beauty, wherever it may be found. I am confident that the future holds many more visits for me. Who knows? I may fall in love with it all and leave NYC in the dust!

Not long after that, I ran across the following passage while rereading a favorite old book about the Mojave by Edna Brush Perkins:

> She wanted to let her hair down, exult in the freedom of wild nature waiting for her in the Mojave Desert of Southern California. Traveling west in 1920 on his tense edge of hope, she anticipated "that sudden sense of romance" indicating "something big" that would take her by storm, and when it came, as many a romantic learns, she almost had more than she'd bargained for. When it came, the kitten had turned into a tiger. The desert ravished her in a way she'd never forget.

This Booth visit occurring at Andrea's instigation meant this would be the first Booth visit where I didn't know who all was going to be showing up. I did know a few, though. There was Cynthia, a.k.a., Wig, surfer and singer-violinist in the group Bermuda Triangle Service. Wig had stumbled upon Deuce of Clubs by way of "a website about 20th-century design. I think it was called *Retro* - there were these pictures of Wagner in Bisbee, Arizona. It was these really amazing trailers [at Bisbee's Shady Dell Trailer Park] and then it was this white blob in the foreground. It was kind of not quite definable. And then I followed the link to your website to find out about it." What she found out about was Wagner, whom Wig soon took on an all-expenses-paid trip to

Hawaii, where she lived part-time. She took Wagner to meet famous surfers, Arthur Lyman, and some Scandinavian guy on the beach who recognized the old boy from his photos on Deuce of Clubs. Afterward, she made a nice website showcasing Wagner's Hawaiian visit.

Wig was obviously the perfect sort of person for a Booth gathering but wasn't sure her Studebaker could safely make the trip, so I hooked her up with a reliable traveling partner who wanted to visit the Booth for a third time - our pal, good ol' Professor Cardyhouse. After they arranged trip details over the phone, Wig and I exchanged emails.

Wig: what should i bring for a 9+ hour car trip with Professor Cardyhouse?
Me: a good book? no, just kidding. the professor's fun to talk to.
Wig: he seems to be running at a different speed. perhaps that's a telephone mannerism?
Me: no. he is dry & deliberate. except when he's drinking, which is rare. so you drive, he can drink. please tape the proceedings.
Wig: anything else I should bring?
Me: i am bringing my own phone booth along with me, but there is no obligation for anyone else to do so.
Wig: this is strange.

Given the overall context, "This is strange" struck me as a pretty funny thing to say.

Tecopa Jane, veteran of the Booth Blizzard trip, also decided she might join us. "I've got nothing happening/no deadlines, so I may cruise on down. I'm not partial to anything that whiffs of a counterculture bandwagon though, so I'll keep you posted," adding cryptically, "I know how to get to Barker Ranch if any Manson fans want to go."

Lara, from the Barstow newspaper, mentioned she might be coming out ("for me - not for the paper") and offered weather info. "At least it won't be snowing... could croak from the heat though. Jeez it has been hellaciously hot. I had heat exhaustion on Sunday. Not a fun thing." The heat did end up forcing Lara to bow out. "It hit 114 today and I was working outside most of the time, and I feel like ca-ca."

Kristin a Los Angeles friend of Daniel's who heard about the Booth and only later discovered Daniel had visited it with me, asked whether I could give "GOOD directions" because "Daniel says it's off of dirt roads that aren't easy to find." That sounded very much like Daniel. "Oh, no, it's not difficult at all," I claimed, sounding very much like me.

Finally, Daniel himself signed on for the visit, after asking, "You don't think there will be any blizzards, do you?" I personally guaranteed there would be none. Why, after his experiences with me, he would trust my guarantee about *anything* us a question you'd have to ask Daniel.

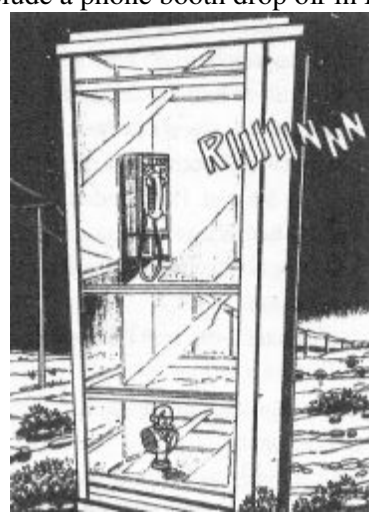
The Booth's fame did come with benefits, opportunities, and just plain curiosities, a good number of which presented themselves during the run-up to

this trip.

As I mentioned to Wig, I was bringing a special guest with me this time to commune with the Booth, a phone booth I'd bought online that had been delivered to me at Burning Man the previous year. After I posted news of my phone booth acquisition to Deuce of Clubs, I was contacted by an event organizer.

> I'm not sure if you've ever heard of DefCon, but it is the world's largest hacking convention, held annually in Las Vegas. I'm wondering if you might be willing to have your phone booth (and you of course!) attend the convention. I would be happy to discuss movement of the phone booth and reimbursement for expenses.
> We are interested in using the phone booth for what is called a "Social Engineering Contest," where people will make phone calls and try to convince/coerce the party on the other end to provide information the contestant is trying to get out of them.

You guessed right if you guessed that I immediately amended my plans to include a phone booth drop off in Las Vegas after our upcoming Booth visit.



Next I heard from Brian, from John Pierson's Independent Film Channel show *Split Screen*. Brian was doing a segment about the Fisher-Price PXL-2000 toy video camera and had wandered from the PXL-2000 section at Deuce of Clubs to the Mojave Phone Booth section. "I think there could be a Split Screen segment in there," he wrote. "We're not just limited to film. related subjects." Brian asked me to name my favorite documentary director. Without a moment's delay I answered, "Errol Morris." Brian then casually mentioned that he might be able to arrange a meeting with Errol Morris at the Mojave Phone Booth.

A MEETING. WITH ERROL. MORRIS.

And I thought, *Sometimes Deuce of Chubs an be a real cool hand.*

Unfortunately, my end zone dance was premature because Pierson "decided it didn't have enough to do with indie film" after all. If only I'd known then that director John Futch would later make a fine independent feature film inspired by the Booth! Oh, well, at least I came this dose to meeting Errol Morris.

I also got word that the Booth was featured in what I was told was the most popular comic in Italy, Ade Capone's *Lazarus Ledd*. Wrote Ade, "The book is out, and it looks like a big success! Looks also like every reader of mine wanna call the booth!" I especially appreciated that the comic's artist, working from my photos of the Booth, depicted Wigner inside the Booth, just as a favor to me, even though Wagner has nothing whatsoever to do with the comic's story.

Whip It! had a history of interrupting my travel plans but now, for once, it was in a good way.

> Subject: cars.com loves Whip It!
> I'm a producer at cars.com, the most comprehensive car information site on the Web and the Internet home of the Car Talk guys "Click & Clack." We've visited Whip It! and would like to select your site as cars.com Site of the Week.

This was welcome news. *Car Talk* would undoubtedly bring a bunch of automotive-minded visitors to Deuce of Clubs. Maybe one of them could diagnose the cause of *Whip It!s* mechanical problem, which had now baffled mechanics in five states. There was even an outside chance of that someone being Click, or Clack, or both. That failing, maybe someone would offer a more semi-permanent mooring for *Whip It!*, whose most recent collapse had left it marooned in San Jose. As part of the upcoming Booth trip I was trying to come up with a way to get *Whip It!* back to Arizona without having to rent a towing vehicle.

It seemed like a good idea to do a rushed gathering of all the *Whip It!* material, which was spread across various locations at Deuce of Clubs, into a centralized *Whip It!* site before leaving for the Booth. I barely remember how I got that done but I did and *Whip It!* was featured as Site of the Week at Cars.com. Sadly, no diagnostic info resulted.

Meanwhile, Andrea was having trouble with her ride connection. From the Booth she and her sister were heading to Bear Valley with other people, people who hadn't caught Booth Fever. "No one else has expressed any interest at all in coming along." Andrea wrote, "and Heather - the leader of the pack - asked, when Laurie got upset about the proposed time change, 'Can't you just blow off the desert thing?"

The bright side to the conflict was that it caused Andrea and Laurie to plan on heading from their rendezvous point in Las Vegas to the Booth even earlier in the day, giving them a better chance of reaching the Booth in advance of the TV reporter, should he show up. Neither of us had heard back from him. I was betting (more honestly, hoping) that he had given up.

By June 29, there had still been no word. Andrea wrote, "I don't know what to do. I want him to know I'm serious and that if he's there early, I won't speak with him, but I don't want to sound like an unbearable bitch right off the

bat." I didn't think it was worth the worry. He'd get over it. Andrea sent him an email that included the following:

> When Laurie heard about your proposed visit and interview, and the presence of cameras, she was upset, didn't want -anything- to do with it, and thought we should ask you not to come at all.
>
> I am so looking forward to this trip, and to my first visit to the desert. I expect my mind to be blown. To be welcomed by a press presence, and particularly photographers, will surely detract from that. Laurie and I need to see that lone booth as we drive down the last road!
>
> In the end, I concluded that I'd be happy to speak with you on camera and do an interview providing you arrive after us, not before.
>
> I'm not trying to be difficult, I just can't have this tainted - for me as well as my sister Laurie. I hope you understand.
>
> Thank you, and I'm looking forward to meeting you Thursday afternoon!

The reporter fired back an email with the subject line "tv is coming." That's TV, always assuming it brings the party.

Filled with anticipation, Andrea did not let the reporter get to her. "I'm officially unbearable to be around today (or so people are telling me). I'm just so excited I can't concentrate on anything, let alone hold a conversation for more than two minutes." I knew what she meant. Though this was my fifth visit, I felt as excited as ever to see the Booth again. "I've given up trying to imagine what's going to happen to me," Andrea wrote. "I don't know if I'll cry, stand there and laugh like an idiot, or become totally overwhelmed and speechless, but that's half the fun."

5 a.m. is not the happiest of wakeup times for a night owl, but my Arizona home was not as conveniently near to the Booth as it could have been and I needed to arrive by noon or thereabouts in order to be able to meet Andrea and Laurie. 5 a.m. it was, then.

On the previous summer's Booth trip we had arrived in the evening and left the Booth before the day heated up in order to retrieve the RV from the Needles repair shop, but it had still been hot. On this July trip, one might have called the days "boiling" if that word didn't imply the involvement of moisture. Reports said temperatures in Death Valley were reaching the high 120s. Over in Baker, they were probably praying there wouldn't be a new record temperature they'd have to commemorate by adding height to their 134-foot all tower.

Thanks to the late-model cargo van I had rented to transport my own phone booth from my house out to the Mojave, I enjoyed air conditioning and no automotive problems, reaching the Cima exit around noon. I dialed the Booth's number from the payphone in front of the gas station. As virtually non-stop as incoming phone calls to the Booth then were, I was prepared to have to call many times but instead heard ringing on my first try. Andrea answered with a cheerful "Mojave Phone Booth!" She and Laurie were out there alone, with no sign of the reporter. She said the two of them had been so

overcome by happiness and sun and isolation and space and desert and sky that they were running around the Booth naked. That again put me in mind of Edna Brush Perkins: "With their new closeness to the earth, as the great, godlike fun soared up once again, they almost, right there in camp, stripped off their clothes and danced naked with joy."

Andrea said they were about to get dressed and for me to "Come on out!" Minutes later I found myself steering yet another vehicle along the sandy trail to the Booth, happy that for the second time I would be arriving at the Booth in the daylight. On the way out I was mulling over a question Andrea had asked me a few weeks before: "What can I bring you from New York City?" Naturally, I asked her to bring Ute Lemper. Oddly enough, it turned out that Lemper had recently performed only a few blocks from Andrea's Manhattan apartment. When I pulled to within sight of the Booth, I admit I half expected to see Ute Lemper standing there, preferably wearing a bowler hat. All expectations were forgotten when by way of Andrea and Laurie I got to re-experience vicariously the joy of a first encounter with the Mojave Phone Booth.

The three of us got to know each other quickly, laughing a whole bunch and working on the Booth phone number rock project until others began turning up, both friends and strangers. This included the TV reporter, who announced with a smug chuckle that he and his camera crew had violated his agreement not to show up before Andrea and Laurie had their time alone together at the Booth. Instead they had slipped in early and done their business. At least they'd had the courtesy to skulk away before the sisters arrived, but he still seemed almost on a mission to prove himself the opposite of the previous trip's reporters who had come out to the Booth to join in on the fun, not to try to take over or arrange events to suit some predetermined storyline.

Charles, a Booth visitor who had read about the Booth on the web and somehow managed to pilot his Miata out there, later remarked on his website: "The reporter took me by surprise. He completely changed personalities when the camera was on. It was very strange." More than strange, it was kind of creepy. He would be speaking normally and then the camera would start rolling and he'd shift into "wacky" drive-time DJ mode. It reminded me of those infamous Casey Kasem tapes where you hear him hopping back and forth between the familiar sunny Casey Kasem voice and a weird, rage-filled version of Casey Kasem's voice, as if there were a toggle switch on the back of his neck.

When the reporter found out that in his absence we'd been working on the Booth phone number using the pile of white rocks, he directed us - not *asked us*, mind you - to re-enact the "scene," as if we were a tricycle he could reposition in the foreground of a car wreck photo in hopes of a Pulitzer.

From behind my bandanna - no, I hadn't been kidding about the bandanna - I tried to help the reporter understand that if you're trying to capture an

actual event and you missed it, then you missed it. This was the Mojave Phone Booth, not Mount Suribachi. We protested that he was attempting to stage manage us in *exactly* the way we had asked him not to do, telling us to do this, do that, stand here, stand there. His method was the opposite of that later employed by filmmaker Kaarina Cleverley Roberto when she shot *Mojave Mirage*, her documentary about the Mojave Phone Booth experience.

> The director wanted to disrupt things as little as possible, not only so that things would be more natural on film, but also because the callers and visitors had invested time, effort, and money to have their own experience, not to be subjects in a film. She didn't want to dominate their experience and turn the environment into her film set.
>
> *- Mojave Mirage: A Study Guide*

Now that the media had decided the Booth was not merely 'weird and "oddball" but weird and oddball and *cool*" I was afraid the Booth might be turned into some for of managed experience because we have long been conditioned to prefer managed experiences - you know, the kind with photo spots" to tell us where to stand to snap our photos of an imitation Matterhorn, photos that, except for the faces, are identical to all other photos ever taken of the imitation Matterhorn in the "happiest place on Earth." For me the Mojave Phone Booth was one of the happiest places on Earth in no small part because it was not a managed experience but rather an experience of our own devising.

I was a little sensitive on the subject of any possible co-opting of the Booth because I had been passed rumors from inside the NPS that the bureaucrats were considering installing restrooms and handrails and who knows what else next to the Booth. Not that restrooms and handrails aren't convenient in certain situations, but it depressed me just to imagine what an information plaque for the Mojave Phone Booth was liable to say as composed and approved by some committee of bureaucrats.

The reporter's antics felt like a preview of that. We couldn't seem to get him to understand that an aversion to being overseen or dominated is one excellent reason why some people might decide to spend their time making their own fun by trekking out to visit a phone booth in the middle of a desert.

Before the nip, Andrea had written me, "An e-mail arrived last night from someone who's planning to come along. The timing and tone of it was not copacetic with the mood I was in at the time, I've got to relax a bit. Can't taint this with any more negativity." Booth visits had become a great deal more complex than they were the night Professor Cardyhouse and I had first shown up there.

Happily, lots of cool, interesting, entirely copacetic people also showed up.

> **Daryl:** I had a co-worker who I'm fairly sure was a speed freak. It was the end of a shift and he said he was going out to a phone booth in the middle of the desert. Weeks before we had kind of

bonded over the fact that I had picked up stakes and hitchhiked from Florida out to L.A. and he thought that was cool and probably thought I was up for that kind of thing, just randomly going out to the desert. Which I was. Sure, why not? Let's go.

Kristen: All of us were introduced to Daryl, who had recently hitchhiked across the country after being booted for blasphemy from Jerry Falwell's bible college. He came with a lame shit that left early, and we're glad he did, because I gave Daryl a lift home to Silver Lake, and he's now a regular fixture in the fermented chaos that is my life.

Nicole: I heard about the Booth from Kristin. I forget how it was that we figured out that you knew Bettie. Bettie was like, "Oh, you should go!" I loved the idea of it, the idea of all these people - and not just the people that were physically going to be there. That was the time when the Internet was still young enough that the idea of getting word out that way, so that people all over the world know about it and call there, that was so exciting in those days.

Daryl: I knew only that one person, the guy I'd come with. At first it was kind of awkward. Nobody really knew anybody. But there was a nice feeling of camaraderie around the place. I liked the vibe of it. I remember liking you. I found your unwillingness to have your photograph taken to be ... quirky. And you had Wagner there. Conversation was made. I ended up hanging out with Kristin and Nicole and you, most of the time.

Into this disparate mix of people gathered at a phone booth I next intended to introduce my own phone booth, fresh from appearances at Burning Man, San Francisco's SoMar Gallery, and Art Car Fest, and about to appear at Def Con 7 in Las Vegas.

Just as I was about to unload my booth from the van, an NPS ranger drove up. This ranger was in no way like the laid-back ranger who had dropped in on us during the blizzard visit. Instead, this ranger s demeanor and buzz cut made him appear as if he had just stepped out of a baseball card from 1962.

I wasn't out there trying to knock the battery off any bureaucrat's shoulder, but I'm not above tweaking one if I think there's a chance I won't get shot or arrested for it, so when the ranger demanded to know what was in the van, I opened the doors to reveal my booth and told him we were there to replace the Booth.

At this, the reporter immediately butted in. "No, no, no, you can't say that to him!" practically groveling before the ranger as if in fear that my actions reflected poorly on him in the face of authority. His ruining my dumb little joke was way funnier and way dumber than the joke itself.

One of the newspaper reporters who had arrived after the TV reporter didn't think much of me or my hitchhiking phone booth either, later carping in his article that, "He'd even brought his own phone booth from home, which he set up next to The Booth for artistic purposes (or something)." I'm not surprised that he didn't get the best impression of me. By the time he had arrived I was pretty well reportered out. It's possible that I was terse with him. I don't remember. He complained that I had "this hipper-than-thou Supercool attitude going, refusing co be photographed and dodging questions regarding the nature of his employment."

I thought that was a somewhat ungenerous exegesis of my dorkitude. "Hey, everybody - I'm hipper than thou!" Honestly, I hardly ever speak in Elizabethan English (except when quoting the Bible, which I do surprisingly

often for a reprobate).

As I've said, I do make it a practice to try to hang on to some shred of privacy. I resist on principle the idea that I owe the disclosure of the details of my life to anyone, let alone some rando who for not necessarily the most honorable of reasons has been entrusted with camera crews or column inches. Honestly, a number of reporters doing stories about the Mojave Phone Booth seemed unaware that they were engaged in mere light news reportage. This was at best a "human interest" story - fluff. At the end of the road to the Mojave Phone Booth was a phone booth, not a Pulitzer Prize.

I especially tried to guard my privacy where it affected my ability to earn a living. My name appearing in newspapers in Brussels, Cairo or Tokyo was not a problem. My name appearing in newspapers in my own region already had been. Clients had seen my name in the paper and asked me what was the deal with "this phone booth business." It didn't seem to bolster their confidence in the reliability of my services.

Regarding photographs, I'm ludicrously easy to break up with, because there are never any photos of me to dramatically return or burn. My own mother has only a small number of photos of me and they're from childhood, when I was defenseless against them. Apart from all other considerations, I had made it clear to reporters in advance of our visit that "there are some in this group who will not want their faces photographed - these people will be clearly marked," as indeed I was, by the bandanna covering my face from the eyeballs down.

We just wanted the reporters to leave so we could get back to having fun. Luckily, this was about the time of the arrival of our secret weapon.

Yep, Dr. Cliff had arrived, bearing gifts. He had told me he'd be bringing along something he hoped would solve *Whip It!'s* persistent distributor shaft pin-shearing problem. I incorrectly guessed it might be a gas can and book of matches.

> The distributor I got for *Whip It!* had a mulileaf tension pin. Not as strong as a heavy-duty tension pin, which in turn is not nearly as strong as a solid steel, hardened roll pin. The new distributor now has 3 solid steel, hardened roll pin, loctited and swaged into place. Mofo will *not* break. I also photo'd the machine work so's you can sing my praises online.

As much as I appreciated Cliff's work, I didn't dare use that pin. I was worried that with an unbreakable pin whatever force was breaking the pins would be pushed up or down some unknown chain of cause and effect in the engine. I had come to view the serial pin shearing as a symptom rather than a problem, with the roll pin playing the role of a fuse. If the pin could no longer snap, what might snap instead? At least broken pins were replaceable on the side if the road, and I carried spare pins with me wherever I drove.

Jane had brought along ice cream to share, and Cliff had brought a couple of bottles of some vegetable concoction marketed under the name Mojave Magic. Thirsty from the heat, I drank a bottle immediately. Cliff waited until the final gulp before telling me he'd downed a bottle the previous day, "and *man*, I got the *runnnnns*!" I felt like the prisoner with a mouthful of soup who sees the rival prison gang leader smiling and winking at him from the kitchen. Happily, CRTs Mojave Magic caused me no "summer complaint."

Cliff waited almost ten years before admitting that he'd been lying about having gotten the runs from it. Dr. Cliff, Evil Dentist might not be quite as evil as advertised, but he is evil, which is why he made a good secret weapon. Got someone you need to annoy into leaving? That's a sentence that ought to be printed on Dr. Cliff's business card. Vindicating my faith in him, Cliff quickly sized up the situation and came up with a plan to get the media to leave us alone: just render any further footage of us unsuitable for broadcast. Calculating that they'd likely have neither the budget nor the time to digitally blur any objectionable elements, he suggested we display certain of our more centrally located fingers as a way of persuading cameras to be pointed elsewhere.

Not the classiest of moves. I can't say I'm proud of it. But sometimes one must fight jackassery with jackassery.

My words had failed, but Cliff's tactic appeared to communicate the message perfectly. The reporter spent the remainder of his time at the Booth talking to people unconnected to us who were more than happy to monkey dance for his camera. We waited for his departure by working on other Booth-related projects, such as attaching to the Booth a small, interesting art assemblage sent by artist Tracy Seneca, who had written, "I imagine you folks may have something exponential on your hands." *And how*, Tracy.

Even a TV reporter trying his damnedest could not halt but merely postpone fun at the Mojave Phone Booth. Once the reporters and their hangers-on cleared out, we were left in peace in the peaceful desert to enjoy ourselves and each other and our friend the Booth.

As always, we took turns answering the phone. Often the others pretended to be me, which was especially fun when I happened to be a woman. Everyone had their own manner of conversing with Booth callers. Cliff, for

example, held to a more mundane view of the Mojave Phone Booth experience, or at least pretended to. One caller, after asking a whole bunch of questions about the Booth and us, asked Cliff, "So, do you have any questions for me?" to which Cliff replied with great emphasis, "I don't have a *single question*." Professor Cardyhouse says, "You know the magic is in his heart, he just doesn't want anyone to know."

Photographic evidence suggests we spent significant chunks of time huddled in the meager shade of our automobiles to try to blunt the sharp edge of the July Mojave sun. Other photos show us displaying less sense than that (*see below*). Ever the gentleman, Cliff tried to snap pictures of anyone trying to slip away to relieve themselves, amassing a collection of photos of people walking to and from camp holding rolls of toilet paper.

"It stared getting cold," Daryl says, "and I remembered, from *My Side of the Mountain*, I think, that you can burn cow turds. So Nicole and I went cow turd gathering. We were all fairly pissed at this point. So the details get bumpy on the night, from here." Food, fun, and fellowship - it was like a Baptist potluck, except with Catholic wine instead of Baptist grape juice. Some visitors to the Booth are even alleged to have partaken of various substances of mind alteration.[1]

We did imbibe other substances, such as Herb Alpert Whipped Cream shooters (apple pie shooters I renamed at Burning Man when everyone in our camp was supposed to have a bar and I was too lazy and just renamed an existing drink). "It was a good vibe," says Daryl. "I felt like these are my kind of folk."

As we sat around the fire, a familiar red Honda Civic appeared on the horizon. Never would I have believed that Daniel would bring his Civic back out there again after what I had put it through the last time, yet there it was. Daniel brought Maurice, his Chow-Pit Bull mix dog who "was in a bad mood. I felt a little bit awkward about that. It was kind of a big mistake, because he

doesn't get out much. He was kind of like the Elephant Man. He threw up. He kind of stank, so I bought an air freshener and put it around his neck. It was a blue "new car" scent air freshener. I didn't realize how important dogs' noses are to dogs. So I think he was just really startled because he couldn't smell anything but a new car."

Also arriving that night were Wig and Professor Cardyhouse.

Cardyhouse: It was probably 11 p.m. or so, and I saw the god-damned Baker thermometer and it said something ridiculous like 108. I laughed and started rolling down the window and it was like a blast furnace. We had a chuckle aaaaaaaand back to AC.
Wig: Driving up at night to a campfire was really great. There was a nice commonality there, you know. Good people.
Daniel: I remember just hanging out, having a good time. Cooking something over the fire, either food or newspaper, or whatever.
Daryl: Everybody seemed to get along swimmingly. I imposed upon someone there for tent space. I'd asked Krisrin if I could have a ride back. I had no place to stay and no way to get back to LA. So, yeah, could somebody give me a place to sleep and a ride back? Strangely enough, people were kind enough to accommodate me.
Nicole: I slept in the car with Kristin because she didn't want to bring a tent. The next morning, oh, my god. I was so achy.
Daniel: I don't remember much about the next morning. It seems like most of what I remember about the Phone Booth is always the first descent into it, at night. It's like Christmas eve and Christmas morning put together.
Daryl: I had displaced somebody. Somebody had to sleep with someone else, because I had a tent to myself.
Nicole: We had a bunch of candles set out around the fire and the next morning I was freaked out at the crust of bugs that had collected on the candles overnight.
Daniel: I just love the contrast between going there at night when it's dark and you wake up the next morning and you're presented with this beautiful, crystal-dear landscape that goes on forever, with the same repeating plant, that goes on forever. It was like a screen saver.
Daryl: I woke up in utter, utter distress. Hung over as I could possibly be, in the heat of the desert. It was unpleasant. Honestly, the worst hangover I've ever had in my life. Keep in mind, I'm a Florida boy, I'm used to *humidity*. I came completely unprepared for this thing. The only liquid that I had consumed since we arrived had been beer and vodka. Those Herb Alpert shooters are not conducive to hydration.
Nicole: We didn't bring enough food. We were silly children. I was twenty-three. I don't remember who it was that gave us food the next morning.
Daryl: You and a couple of the other guys were already shooting off rockets. So I crawl, blinking, into the sunlight. And somebody handed me a beer. Off we go! Also, I had left with, maybe, $15. I was fucking broke. And you were all utterly, utterly generous with everything you had. I couldn't pay for anything. I recall just being lost far from home and broke and being well received and welcomed by everyone I met there. The rest of the day you were there for me. Rockets were shot off, flaming toilet paper golf was played.

On her website, Kristin gave the short and sweet: "After 20 pees in the cactus, 40 oz. of liquor, 120-degree temperatures, 180 phone calls, and about 900 bugs, we finally split."

Nicole: There was that sense of isolation, you have all these people out there. My strongest impression was that it was not just a fun experience but kind of an eye-opening experience. It's something that wouldn't happen today.
Daryl: The Mojave Phone Booth had a profound effect on me. Not necessarily the structure itself, of course, but meeting the people there.

A few of us stayed on after the others left. Along with his Mojave Magic, Cliff had brought along a camera rocket to replace the one we had lost during the Booth blizzard visit, thanks to his impatient "instruction manuals are for wussies" stance. There was no blizzard at the Booth this time, nor even rainstorms, just a steady downpour of sunshine. Our second camera rocket captured a number of photos of the desert around the Booth but - because there was no way to ami it - not even one photo included the Booth. Again, if only we'd had camera drones in those days!

We decided to search for my lost camera rocket in hopes that its camera had maybe caught the Booth or our phone number rock work, assuming the camera had survived its parachuteless plunge back to Earth.

We didn't search for long. It was too hot. On milder days the desert is like the sun in the fable who uses gentle warmth to persuade the stone cutter to remove the overcoat the wind hadn't been able to remove by force. On this day the desert was more like from *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Despite the heat, Jane and I decided to go confluence hunting. I had already visited a handful of confluences and sent them in to the Degree Confluence Project and I thought it would be fun to use my GPS to find and photograph the confluence nearest the Booth (35N, 116W). The Degree Confluence Project is summed up on its website as follows: "The goal of the project is to visit each of the latitude and longitude integer degree intersections in the world, and to take pictures at each location. The pictures, along with a narrative describing the adventures it took to get there are then posted on this website. This creates an organized sampling of the world." Efforts like the Confluence Project are good ways to get people thinking about how abstractions and reifications play out in the real world, and they're also good mechanisms to get people out in places they'd probably never see

otherwise - not unlike our Booth trips.

Jane and I took off in her truck and wound up being gone longer than we'd expected after burying the truck's tires in a sand pit in the road. We pried our way to freedom with a 2xl0 someone had kindly left next to the pit. It seemed wise not to return by crossing the sand pit again, so we continued along the trail we were on, which led us to Kelbaker Road, which we decided to take back to Baker so we could return to the Booth bearing gigantic sandwiches from the Mad Greek restaurant. When we did, we noticed that someone was stretched out and face down underneath the van.

Not all of our party were used to the anvil treatment from Brother Sun. Cardyhouse's friends sometimes describe him as a delicate flower. He is the type of person who, on a shoestring trip through foreign countries, made sure his backpack contained abdominal bandages. Not small bandages for finger boo-boos. No. He packed *abdominal bandages*. As often seems to happen when people over-prepare for hypothetical calamity, real calamities seem to find Professor Cardyhouse. He once had to be rescued on the way to a train station because he had a blowout - *on a luggage wheel*.

On this Booth visit his precautions were less effective than hoped. "I had a hat and thought I was drinking a lot of water," he says. "We weren't out that long."

It's not as though we had been running, or even trotting. We had merely meandered slowly around an area maybe a couple hundred yards square. "I must've hit some localized heat wave or something," he claims. "I was just incapacitated. I don't even know how to describe it, but it was just like, I can't move, and I'm not in serious pain - like, I don't need to go to the hospital or anything - but at the same time, something's really fucked."

The Professor had been feeling less than stellar when we left but seemed mostly just tired. I asked Wig how he'd been doing in our absence. Wig shook her head and said, "Bad." I almost used the Booth phone to call 911. I had no idea whether an ambulance driver would be willing or able to drive out there, but the fact that a crowd of mostly uninsured people even considered summoning actual medical assistance speaks to how badly the Professor seemed to be faring.

Had all of us been asked before the trip to bet which of us was most likely to succumb to heat exhaustion, there could have been no betting because we'd all have wanted to bet on the same person including, I have to believe, the Professor himself.

Cardyhouse: I maxxed and relaxxed, learning all about the underside of whatever van it was Cliff has a photo of me under. I remember you and Jane driving away to do some explorin'. There wasn't anyone there except me. I got heat stroke but - you all drove off? Where was Cliff? WHERE IS EVERYONE OH GOD I AM GOING TO DIE UNDER THIS TRUCK IN THE DESERT!
Me: That is not true. Not a chance. I know Cliff was there, I know Wig was there.
Cardyhouse: Man, I distinctly remember you asking if I was going to be okay alone.
Me: No way! I wouldn't leave you all alone in the desert even if you were feeling fine!
Cardyhouse: I don't remember being heckled by Cliff, which, you know, that's what I would

expect. But yeah, if he has a photo of me under the van, then ... that.

Luckily, the effects of the heat were temporary. The Professor recovered and it was project time again. Before the trip, Wig had emailed me: "I have an idea for the use of about 6 Deuce of Clubs cards. Do you have any? Not sure if the idea will fly though." As coiner of the excellent Deuce-related email closing "vaya con dos," Wig was the perfect one to have brought with her a Deuce of Clubs kite she had made. She had taken the cards I sent and attached them to the kite's tail. She spent one late afternoon vainly trying to keep the kite in the air. Maybe it shared aerodynamic issues with Leonard Knight's gospel balloon. It was a beauty nonetheless and I was surprised when she said it was the first kite she had ever made.

There was a surprise late arrival to the party, none other than our pal Ponyboy, who drove up with her boyfriend, Ivory, in her next in-process art car. Ponyboy tried to let me know they were coming, but the Booth's line had been busy every time they dialed. Only Daniel's having left the previous day thwarted a complete reunion of the entire Booth Trip II crew (a glorious occasion that finally took place in 2017).

Ponyboy and Ivory were in the process of moving from St. Louis to Tucumcari - TookemDookem, as Ponyboy always called it - where she was to enroll in blacksmithing school. They stopped at the Booth on their way to San Francisco to get Ponyboy's stuff out of storage. Before the sun went down, Ponyboy even did a little work on her in-process art car, named, like her first art car, Ponyboy GirlieToolshed.

Ponyboy had a coincidental connection with Wig, another in this trip's chain of coincidental connections that furthered a lot of Six Degrees of Mojave Phone Booth theorizing.

Ponyboy: I had a great conversation with Wig, because we had common friends in SF. Her boyfriend, Adam, is one of my most favorite drummers in the universe. He played in Little My, an awesome band that I loved. And one of my very dearest friends, Kristin, ended up marrying Nat, who was the singer in Little My. And Nat and Kristin and I were roommates for a while.
Wig: I also remember Ponyboy's boyfriend spinning physical acts of excellence.

Jane had asked Ivory, "Are those *go* muscles or *show* muscles?" so he wowed us all by grabbing onto one of the poles on the side of the cattle guard beside the Booth and raising his body parallel to the ground, like an Olympic gymnast. "He calls that Black Flag," Ponyboy explained.

Ponyboy: I was really happy to have made it to the phone booth again. Like, totally fun. Ivory told his family about the escapade. Never having been out of St. Louis, he was quite struck by the experience of the desert and the Joshua trees and, of course, the novelty of the Booth and Booth Tribe Culture.

That night I pulled out strings of battery-powered decorative lights I'd brought and arranged them all over the Booth. Andrea, knowing she was going to have to leave the Booth in the afternoon, had said, "I WANT PICTURES!" Nighttime photos were therefore taken and good times were enjoyed by all.

From the Booth, some of us continued on to Las Vegas to drop off my phone booth at the hotel where Defcon 7 would soon be held. I then drove home to Arizona and back up later to Las Vegas for the convention, which was tons of fun. My phone booth performed its role perfectly during the social engineering contest.

The reimbursement promised by the Defcon organizer who'd recruited me - whose DefCon handle included the word *Evil* - never materialized, but it was at least somewhat entertaining to hear her bizarre excuses every time I phoned to ask about it: "Your check's in the mail"; "Can't talk - just sliced open my finger and there's blood everywhere"; "We'll talk later, there's a hurricane!" (I'm not making any of that up). With the exception of Dr. Cliff, Evil Dentist, one probably shouldn't have to learn the hard way not to trust people who have *Evil* right there in their name. I suppose there is a certain appropriateness to having been social engineered at Def con. (Instead of one of Def con's "I SPOTTED THE FED" T-shirts, I should have one that says, "I GOT CONNED AT DEFCON.")

After returning to Arizona, I needed to return the van before getting

charged for another day. I'd been promised help by the Evil One in getting my phone booth out of the rental van at my house ("We WILL find people who can help you load and unload on both ends"). No help materialized in any form whatsoever.

Phone booths are heavy - like, coffin-heavy, as in you basically need pallbearers to lift one. I had to resort to visiting the basketball court down the street and offering five gang bangers five bucks apiece to come and help me move it. On the way there, one of them asked whether I had a big enough crescent wrench to loosen the ground bolts. It was almost touching to see the disappointment on their faces when they found out we would be moving a phone booth that already belonged to me. They thought I'd hired them to steal one right off the street.

On a happier note, it was nice to return home to lots of Booth emails. Charles, who had driven his Miata to the Booth, emailed to say thanks and then emailed back the same day about an addition to our project with the white rocks: "Doubting Thomases that I know prompted me to prove the existence of the Booth today. We managed to add the area code to the phone number. Pics to be posted as soon as my disposable camera comes back from the cleaners."

A woman named Ehrin wrote:

> YOU ARE THE COOLEST. It is my dream to someday travel to the phone. Maybe I'll get married there. Thanks for your story. I hope you had a good weekend. I am jealous.

As far as I was aware, a marriage at the Mojave Phone Booth would have been a first.' But others were to experience Booth-related life changes every bit as momentous as a marriage.[2]

NOTES

1 In the interests of no spending the remainder of my days in mandatory minimum Federal lockdown, I'd like to note for the record that it has been at least seven years + 1 day since I have consumed any illegal substance whatsoever.

2 Ten years later, I found Ehrin on Facebook.

Doc: So ... did you get married at the Mojave Phone Booth?

Ehrin: OMG I cannot believe you sill have that email :) Unfortunately, we did not end up getting married a the Mojave Phone Booth but we sill want to get out to see it and play.

Doc: I wish you could sill visit it. Unfortunately, federal bureaucrats forced the local phone company to remove and destroy the booth in May of 2000.

Ehrin: Do you know the date they tore it down? We were married on May 17th 2000 and that would have been way too much of a coincidence.

Doc: Very close! It was early in the morning on the 16th.

Ehrin: My hubby and I were just talking about it yesterday. How mad we would have been if we did plan to get married there and it was gone!

Doc: Yeah, if you'd shown up there to get married only to find the Booth had been ripped out the day before!

Ehrin: Very sad piece of history gone, all due to the bureaucratic b.s. that has to rear its ugly head time after time.

GET A LIFE VS. GET A CLUE

BOOTH REACTIONS AND REPERCUSSIONS

A couple of years into the Booth Project I still sometimes heard discouraging words. One email was entirely blank except for its subject line that said - I'm sure you can guess it - you have way too much time on your hands." There were more than a few sneers from reporters and columnists. But what might a professional sociologist have to say about the Mojave Phone Booth? Here is how Warren TenHouten, a UCLA sociology professor, was quoted in a newspaper article:

> It's the get-a-life factor. Some people just have nothing to do, so they pursue shreds of information that have no value. It amuses me, but there's something pitiful about it too. I mean, what's the most interesting thing that could happen by being so mischievous as to call a public pay phone? Someone answers. a person you have absolutely no connection with. You exchange names and talk about the weather. What a thrill.

I found that a surprising response from someone allegedly expert at understanding human doings. Rather than thoughtlessly dismissing it, one would expect a sociologist of all people to think *at the very least*, "Although this phenomenon does not interest me personally, it does interest me that large numbers of others worldwide find it interesting." I loved the rejoinder offered by Deuce of Clubs reader Joe Ault:

> It's the "get-a-job factor" ... some people are so uncreative that the best thing they can come up with is to spend five or so years after undergrad to get a PhD in sociology. It amuses me. but there's something pitiful about it too. I mean, how fulfilling could it be to spend your career studying what other people are doing with their lives?

Years later, Jacob Garbe put it nicely: "I never ceases to astound me that people think there's something 'serious' they need to be doing with their life that makes injecting wonder into one's everyday experience a frivolous activity." After looking up some of TenHouten's work, Professor Cardyhouse's response was, "'Dual Symbolic Classification and the Primary Emotions: A Proposed Synthesis of Durkheim's Sociogenic and Plutchik's Psychoevolutionary Theories of the Emotions.' (*International Sociology* 10:427-445) - THIS you find more interesting than a phone booth in the desert? I have a theory I will be giving him a FAT LIP."

To be fair, I did receive an email from someone who had worked with the sociologist and told me, "I've had to turn his messy WordPerfect documents into web pages (since he's far too busy to learn how to click File/SaveAsHTML)" but added that "he does come across in the article as an idiot, though he seems nicer in person than the crank they quoted in the paper."

The UCLA professor was not alone among academics pouring snooty dismissiveness on the Mojave Phone Booth Project. The following is from a Canadian academic's book entitled *The Turtle Hypodermic of Sickenpods*:

> The larger and sustaining community we once took for granted no longer exists in any meaningful way. Thus the latest craze sweeping the Internet of making contact with the most isolated listening post in the world, the Mojave Phone Booth, which has created a temporary network of desert callers and phone fetishists reaching out for "community."

Sure, it was easy to ridicule Booth enthusiasts. And it's true that, although some of the conversations I had on the phone at the Booth were interesting conversations in their own right, with others, yes, I just tried to have as much fun as I could. Sometimes it was just, *Omigod, South Africa called!* But the Mojave Phone Booth did bring about many genuine and lasting connections among former strangers and even spurred huge life changes. These academics seemed to have forgotten the commonplace that even the weirdest little things can have huge consequences.

For example, remember Daryl, who rode out to the Booth and ended up ditching his ride back home, opting instead to connect with new friends? To the UCLA sociologist's sarcastic dismissal of the Booth - What's the most interesting thing that could happen by being so mischievous as to call a public pay phone?" - Daryl responds, "Talk about *epically* not getting it!"

> Let me tell you how the Booth changed *my* life. Kristin and I ended up dating for maybe a year. More importantly, we ended up being best friends. I mean, best best. To the point where we were inseparable for the subsequent five years. I ended up driving her across the country and I'm still in touch with her weekly. She and Nicole are two of my closest friends. My entire life has been colored by my relationship with Kristin.<.
>
> So, literally, that trip has shaped my life in unimaginable ways. And all of it, as far as I can tell, is positive. So tell that sociology professor I got your "get-a-life factor" right here. That was one of the seminal weekends in my evolution as an adult.

Writing this book sometimes made me wonder whether I was being somewhat self-important, as if I believed myself to be writing an account of

events that changed the world. Then I realized that for some people it really did change their world. That's true for probably no one more than Andrea. "Most - all, really - of the changes in my life since then are pretty much rooted in that summer," she says. Andrea had lived in Manhattan for 11 years, working in the theater, and had always said she would never leave. After her encounter with the desert she moved directly from New York to a ghost town in New Mexico.

> The transcription of your conversation with Lorene, the first day she answered the phone, to this day, I credit with almost the full responsibility for my outlook on life, the way I'm living it right now. I've gone back and re-read that several times over the last couple of years and it's all about your reaction and the questions you ask and your reaction to her answers: "Oh my god, you have to drive how far to get your mail, and to do laundry, and" blahblahblah. You were just like, "Sheeee! That is the coolest thing I've ever heard."
>
> And people come out here (to Madrid, New Mexico, where Andrea moved from Manhattan] and they're like, An outhouse?" And we're like, "Yeah - but the Milky Way is as plain as the Big Dipper! So your, just, slack jawed appreciation for how she was describing her life was truly my first glimpse - my only glimpse - into living out in the middle of nowhere, to living in a really rural, desert area. I don't know what my life would be like if your reaction to her had been different. Because that really did inform my perspective. To this day.

Had she ever before thought of living in a desert?

"No, no, of course not! No. I never gave it a second thought. The desert? You fly over it. You know? It had never entered my consciousness before." Now she says, "A ghost town in an old miner's cabin with a dirt floor and a wood stove and an outhouse was just about as far off of center the other way as New York was. I really didn't want a mundane existence. This is as interesting and extreme, in a way - I wish there were a better word - as life in New York was." Andrea's experience mirrors that of the late Marta Becket, creator of the Death Valley Opera House, who wrote (in her highly recommended, wonderfully discursive book *To Dane on Sands*):

> All of my friends and acquaintances from New York thought I had lost my mind when I told them about this old theater that had been abandoned for twenty years. When I told them I was planning to leave New York for good and make a new life for myself out in the desert, they were convinced that I was now a hopeless case and gave me up for good.

What might Andrea be doing had she never heard of the Booth?

> Um, gosh. I don't know, because even if I'd never gone out there, if I'd seen your site, I mean, even more key than going out to the Booth really truly was the transcription of that phone call of yours. I could still be in New York City. I can't even get my head around it. I don't know what I would be doing. I really don't know. It really, truly did change everything.

Not that Andrea didn't have a life before, but if Andrea didn't "get a life" - a new life, moving from The City That Never Sleeps to a *ghost town*! - I don't know who has. And the Mojave Phone Booth helped her do it.

Not all academics failed to be interested in the Mojave Phone Booth phenomenon. I spoke with Andre Simic, a professor of anthropology at the University of Southern California, who was surprised at TenHouten's dismissal of the Booth phenomenon even though some of what Simic says is somewhat consonant with what the UCLA professor said.

> One of the values in this society, a value which is increasingly strong, is the value of change, of innovation, of novelty. And so here's another kind of strange, novel thing for some people to do, people looking for experience because we've become this society of drugstore cowboys, people looking for challenges but their lives are not so challenged in reality. They're not being attacked by men from outer space, they re not involved in a war and so forth. There are very few real-life challenges, so they're constantly looking for adventures, small and large. and many of them are contrived. It's an example of being ahead of he crowd, of setting one's self apart. You're having an adventure that not very many people are having. And of course, the adventure is really longer than talking on the phone. It's going out there, meeting people, hanging around. It's a way to fill empty space. timewise.

The important difference between TenHouten and Simic is that Simic was willing to engage the Booth phenomenon rather than simply wave it off.

I hold no advanced degrees, thank Wotan, but if we have to go and get all academic about the Mojave Phone Booth Project, I might observe that our contriving absurd little challenges for ourselves conforms nicely to a certain famous old scholar's definition of *play* as "the pursuit of gratuitous difficulty."

Interestingly, and in contrast to parts of Simic's assessment of the Booth phenomenon, one of Simic's own students had her life changed by the Booth. In the course of creating a documentary film on the Mojave Phone Booth for her Master's Thesis, Kaarina Cleverley Roberto and her husband Derck ended up becoming good friends with Lorene and Terry, and remain so to this day.

Similarly, random telephony has for me paid dividends denominated in friendships. You might remember the story I told earlier in this book, about the wrong number that led to my friendship with Audra. Thanks to the Mojave Phone Booth, I met and befriended lots of other interesting people. I would second what Canadian writer Shannon McKinnon has written: "We talk about how most of us will still drop everything at the sound of the telephone ringing. Who doesn't secretly believe that one phone call could change our lives?"

It's been my experience that human connections can be neither predicted

nor second-guessed. My friend Dikran recently asked me about a friend from college whom I haven't seen for quite some time. He was surprised when I told him I was dedicating this book to her. The reason is that she, likewise, did something seemingly small for me that set off a chain reaction to which I can in hindsight trace most of the good things in my life since, including the Mojave Phone Booth, which in turn altered many lives. That's how connections work, after all, and why it's ill-advised for anyone, academic or otherwise, to denigrate the effects or importance of things one does not understand.

I don't know whether anyone other than Andrea was moved enough by the Booth story to just pick up and move to a desert, but a lot of people were moved nonetheless. The Mojave Phone Booth obsession was no longer mine alone and I enjoyed reading the emails people sent to tell me what it meant to them.

- Enjoyed the hell out of your phone booth story. I envy you.
- As I sit in my office day after day, I often wish I could do exactly what you did, finding that phone booth. Well, who knows? Maybe someday I'll find my own.
- This is just the catalyst I need to get me off my ass and go out on an adventure.
- I just talked to you on that legendary desert phone about five minutes ago, which is an amazing thing to me. In a life filled with mindless tedium and the void, desolate pursuit of happiness and the ultimate "it" via grunt jobs and wage slaving, it is refreshing - no, replenishing - to find someone with his finger on the pulse of life's true nature: killing time in the most amusing way possible.
- Fascinating and refreshing to the soul, to say the least
- By day, I'm a mild mannered web developer but by night, I secretly desire to be an artistic anarchist, painting oddly organic lines onto my beat up Mercury Topaz and heading out into the Black Rock desert to burn an effigy of a neon man. Why haven't I done any of this? I have no clue. I still secretly harbor these desires, and sites like Deuce of Clubs make me feel as though I'm not alone. I ran across the Deuce after reading an article in Salon about a phone booth out in the middle of the Mojave Desert The guy who started it all [has] got a practical "Question Authority" spirit that I totally dig. He inspires me, not in that sugary, "Wind Beneath my Wing." way, but in a way that makes me want to shove some shirts and underwear into my pack, hop into the Pope Mobile (the aforementioned Topaz) and relive my days in college when the road trip was not simply a luxury but a necessity. I need that.

I loved hearing about plans and adventures the Booth had spurred people to think up. In California, Jeremiah Day and "some of the brightest young talents in the Los Angeles art community" put on a "Mojave Desert Phone Booth Art Show: An Art Show About A Mail Art Project About A Newspaper Article About An Internet Phenomenon About A Phone Booth In The Desert." I wasn't able to attend, but I won't ever stop loving that title.

Plans didn't have to be realized to be appreciated. It was just nice knowing that the Booth was something that got people thinking.

- TradeMark G. of The Evolution Control Committee: Dagnabbit, I tried and tried and you guys had the phone tied up all night. And my call even had a slightly conceptual (woo!) theme, because I was going to red-box the call from a payphone here.
- Mark T. of The Payphone Project: thought your gathering was next month. i was going to call and try to conference you in with a row of payphones under Rockefeller Center, then with some phones in the UK.

• Neil K.: Well, I made it out to the booth yesterday afternoon. Thanks for your directions and so on. Nice plaque you have. Sadly, the phone was dead - no dialtone - so I couldn't crack open the handset and plug in my laptop.
• Shannon McKinnon reporting in Canada's *National Post*: One woman [came to the Booth] in a long, beautiful gown that she had never had the opportunity to wear. She [said] that this was the perfect occasion.

The Booth was doing what I had hoped it would do, summoning questions and calling up ideas. It continued to do that for me as well. I had filled a five-gallon bucket full of glass pieces from the Booth's broken windows, not knowing what I'd do with them. They ended up giving rise to The Mojave Phone Booth Glass Project, inaugurated when animal trainer Jackie sent me a tiger whisker and requested a piece of Booth glass. I put a scan of the tiger whisker on Deuce of Clubs and from there the items offered in trade became increasingly more bizarre and interesting: a sanitary napkin belt for dogs, an autographed Amy Grant concert program, an autographed Siegfried and Roy show program, a tuft of hair from a wolf, a phone booth scene diorama constructed out of Lego blocks, photos from the spot where The Big Bopper died, DNA of a pea. The most elaborate trade item was from a guy named Shawn, who sent a set of chips off of Florida State University buildings, beautifully mounted and labeled, along with a vial of water from the university fountain. Krishna warned, "You'd better watch it and make sure this doesn't get into the public eye, like that phone booth thingy. Otherwise, everyone's gonna do the same thing and suddenly there won't be any buildings left"

Just as sort of a prank, I listed a piece of Booth glass on eBay. The auction winner had this to say on his website:

> The next day the following was in my inbox: "Congratulations - this auction successfully ended. Item Title: Genuine Mojave Phone Booth Glass!"
>
> I danced, I cheered, I acted like an utter fool. After a few emails back and forth, I received my prize, along with a couple old X-Mags, a copy of Macros, and a signed picture of Wagner.

Maybe it didn't turn out to be a prank, after all. Or did it? This famous Phone Booth business was sometimes confusing.

Unbidden, people had also taken to sending me information about The [X] in the Middle of Nowhere," where [X] = anything that [X] could possibly =, such as, "a bathroom in the middle of almost nowhere."

The Mojave Phone Booth even helped to make pirate radio history.

> One of the most fascinating broadcasts, perhaps in North American pirate history, was the KMUD Mojave Desert phone booth show. In late March 2000, KMUD broadcast from the incredibly remote Mojave Desert phone booth, which was receiving dozens of calls per day from around the world because of its cult status. KMUD fielded these calls and broadcast them live on the radio. In addition, CBC (Canada) had a TV crew videotaping the booth and KMUD's broadcast.
>
> - Andrew Yoder, *Pirate Stations* (McGraw-Hill, 2002)

I'd gotten word of the broadcast in advance, from a KMUD operative:

> There's a faint, hardy whispering rumor in the wind, that some goddamn pirate radio conspiracy might do a remote call-in talk show at the site of the Mojave Phone Booth this weekend. If such despicable conduct were to occur, it possibly could be the infamous KMUD. There is even some chance that this heinous plot could be posted on "The Grapevine Shortwave" tomorrow or Friday. And this wafting rumor includes the possibility that incoming calls might be broadcast live. Which reminds me, does the Duce of Chubs have same telephone number? Just curious, no real reason at all, nope.

Shannon McKinnon, whom I mentioned earlier, was there to document the nefariousness.

> Two men show up to broadcast a pirate radio show live from the booth. While tapping into the phone wire they answer and document calls. Someone tells us that a story has been posted on the Net claiming that the booth is causing too much traffic in the desert and that it might be removed. A physicist from California disagrees; he says it's been so good for tourism in the area that the road is going to be patched up and services will be put in. We realize that our own presence will only add to its notoriety, The radio show begins and it's great - calls are broadcast live to listeners via hijacked signals. People pick it up from as far away as Alberta, but the signal is strongest in and around Los Angeles. "This is how radio should be done," says one of the program's hosts. They are funny and relaxed, and we all take turns being on the air. Godfrey phones to see how it's going and says he started all of this because he wanted people to see an ordinary object in an unusual way.

I did, indeed. But with the new governmental regime in the area, I was increasingly worried about the Booth's continued safety. I also continued to worry for the safety of the crowds of not-necessarily-desert-savvy people driving out to try to find it.

> Several wrong-turns, and twelve miles of rough. sandy road and we find the booth. It is as isolated as the publicity ha, made it out to be, but with fame comes crowds, and we find ten others camped out around the phone, taking turns answering the calls that kept ringing into the small hours of the night
>
> - From *Jaunt: The Journal of the Crackerjack Adventurer*

> I learned from the web site that people are afraid the phone booth is going to become too well known. That concern almost made me choose not to do this article, then I concluded it was too good a tale not to tell. But I have decided not to reveal the exact location - so you'll have to hunt for it, as we did. It's not easy to find, and the road is best tackled in a four-wheel drive vehicle. If you decide to go, take along water, and some food (no convenience stores out here) and a good sense of humor. Want to find it on the Web - just do a search for Mojave Phone Booth - oh, one other thing, you won't find directions there, either.
>
> - Bob Moore, The Last Phone Call," *Route 66 Magazine*

The Booth's growing popularity caused me to alter my own Booth habit. I began calling the Booth less regularly because the chances became too good of getting an answer. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy talking with strangers. It was more that I found myself just wanting to hear the line ring again.

I also decided to alter the Booth's website after I began to ponder whether having a map to the Booth up on Deuce of Clubs might not constitute a "moral hazard" or "attractive nuisance" or some other legalese mumbo-jumbo leaving me open to imputed culpability. I was getting emails saying such things as, "My husband and I live in the L.A. area and are both retired, maybe

we'll take a drive out there one day." I don't know whether this was the same retired couple I later heard about who had to be rescued because their barely road-worthy old convertible broke down in the desert far from both the Interstate and the Booth. They had brought along neither water nor food and were damned fortunate that local Mojave resident Charlie Wilcox had gotten into the habit of patrolling the area to help lost or stricken Booth visitors. Trouble was, this situation kept repeating itself. "Daniels' Web site is filled with accounts of people who have gotten lost on back roads looking for the booth," said one newspaper article. A good number of people owed their continued existence to the ministrations of Charlie and his old red pickup truck.

Years later Charlie would show me his Booth scrapbook featuring photos of many of the people he'd rescued. As Dennis Casebier pointed out, the Booth did get a lot of people out into the desert who ordinarily might never go out and experience it for themselves. Some had never been to the desert before. Some had been to a desert but hadn't been interested by one before - salutary, but also potentially scary, considering what can happen to people who travel to a remote desert without understanding what remote deserts can do to a person.

The more I thought about it, the more I feared something tragic might happen to some hapless city dweller. No one should take a desert visit lightly. Sometimes when people hear about other people having done something, they just assume they can do it, too. Probably they can, but sometimes they forget to consider whether the people who did it might have had knowledge or training or equipment that enabled them to do it.

One famous example is Christopher McCandless, a young man who wandered into an Alaskan wilderness with few provisions and even fewer preparations, apparently believing nature would somehow take care of him. Nature took care of him, all right - McCandless starved to death in an abandoned bus that sat only a few miles from rescue. He's celebrated in a book and film that portray him as in love with nature, but I wouldn't say Christopher McCandless was in love with nature. I would say he was merely infatuated with it. Infatuation is attraction without knowledge. If he had truly loved the wilderness he'd have gotten to know it, learned all he could about it, and would therefore have had a good chance of still being alive to love it today, and there would be no book and film celebrating his doomed attraction. There would also not be people trooping into an Alaskan forest to visit the bus in which he died. If no one yet has died emulating McCandless or looking for that bus, I won't be surprised if someone eventually does.

That was something that worried me about the increasing numbers of people visiting the Booth. I didn't want someone dying for a meme - not even a meme I loved. (As I write this, a meme called "planking" is sweeping the globe and has resulted in at least one death, that of a young Australian who tried to plank between two buildings.) I knew of many instances of people just

driving out to the Mojave like they'd drive out for a day at the beach, often in extremely inappropriate or unreliable vehicles.

You might be thinking of at least two inappropriate and unreliable vehicles I drove into the Mojave, and you're not wrong. I also often foolishly hike alone in the desert mountains surrounding my property, where a broken ankle at the wrong time and place could easily be a death sentence. But these are risks I've taken because I'm used to the desert, always prepared to survive in the desert, and might even have a little bit of a death wish, who can say? Even so, nowadays I always carry my cell phone so that I'll have at least a fighting chance, should I decide I want one.

The reason I had left the map up on the site longer than I'd thought wise was out of fear of people getting lost. That same reason was what convinced me to remove the map. If people were determined to try their luck against the desert, I couldn't stop them. All I could do was urge them to read up on the desert, take along plenty of water and food and then even more water, and promise that if all else failed and they found themselves lost or stranded, they'd stay on the road and with their vehicle.

The situation wasn't improved when on July 8, 1999, a huge storm hit the Mojave Desert that washed sand over the dirt roads, turning them into sand traps and leaving the road to the Booth nearly impassible to all but 4WD vehicles. Even Cima Road, which was paved, was closed for a time. From that point on, the road to the Booth that most visitors used was reliably accessible only to four-wheel-drive vehicles or drivers who knew how to drive on desert sand. I couldn't in good conscience continue to give out directions to the Booth to people whose level of common sense I did not personally know.

Some thought my removing the map was an attempt to limit my liability in these lawsuit-crazy times. Partly, yes. But I also think it's more interesting and fun for people to work out stuff for themselves. For those who can't, it's a losing game to test oneself against a desert. I noted on the site that, having no especially strong desire for people to get lost and die, I had taken the map down. For that I received more guff than I'd have expected.

I think it's really rude of you to help in all the 'Booth' hype then tell everyone you'd really prefer them not to visit it anymore and not give directions to the booth.

Again, any determined person who really wanted to could easily have found the Booth by means of a decent map (provided they held the map right side up, of course). Even that meager skill became unnecessary once other sites about the Booth began popping up. In lieu of content, many of them tended to post little more than maps and directions. The proliferation of maps increased the number of people heading out there, in tum increasing the hostility of the head of the newly installed bureaucracy.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE MEDIA BLIZZARD

BUREAUCRATS VS. THE CIMA MINE

> I don't claim to be an exper on the East Mojave because, after 62 years, I'm sall in the process of learning about it. So when I see government personnel. with only months of Eat Mojave under their belts, sharing their desert "expertise with visiting tourists, I tend to think of it as "the blind leading the blind."
>
> - Bob Ausmus, *East Mojave Diary*

Here is where the Booth story becomes increasingly more heartbreaking than heartwarming. Like Wagner, a newly mainstreamed Mojave Phone Booth found it tougher to serve as an expectancy violation. Throughout the remainder of its life, the Booth would find no shelter from the attention storm. "I guess that the booth's existence lends credence to Marshall McCluhan's statement: "*There are no remote places,*" a Deuce of Clubs correspondent noted.

Indeed, the Booth had become a Schrödinger's Booth - there, but "nowhere" (yet seemingly everywhere). It wasn't until after I'd already done dozens of media interviews that I belatedly began to fear that all this observation might wreak upon the Booth some son of Heisenbergian alteration. As a desert dweller, it has always bugged me when people who claim to love the desert move here and contribute to the plowing under of it. I began to wonder whether I might not be doing something similar to the Booth.

I had started to hear rumors about the newly installed National Park Service martinet - whose name, aptly enough, was Martin - and how she was

displeased about Booth visitors, whom she was said to regard as interlopers upon her new fiefdom. I didn't yet know it but trouble had already been brewing between her and those who had been living in the area long before the NPS planted its flag there.

The NPS's inviting slogan "Visit your National Parks" turned out to have less than full-hearted endorsement from the fledgling abstraction known as the Mojave National Preserve. The desire of people to visit "their" Preserve in order to see the Mojave Phone Booth did not align with the desires of the ruling bureaucrats. We all know whose desires prevail in such conflicts. It stared looking as if, by naming the Mojave Phone Booth and making a website devoted to it, I might as well have sent a telegram to the NPS begging them to pass a death sentence on it.

The increasing attention to the Booth would lead to increasing numbers of Booth visitors, which would lead to further official attention - never, ever a good thing for people who just want to have fun and be left alone. Accordingly, I started posting notices to the Mojave Phone Booth website, warning of the dangers of the desert and, more importantly, the growing dangers of bureaucracy. I tried especially to discourage people from contact with any NPS employees. I knew my warnings probably would have little effect but didn't know what else I could do. I once heard an on-the-street interview with some Beatlemaniacs outside a hotel where the Beatles were staying. They were waiting they said, for a chance to get some Beatle hair in their fists and yank it out. The reporter asked, "But wouldn't that hurt them?" to which one retuned, "I don't care! *I love 'em!*" A similar type of love, I feared, could put an end to the Mojave Phone Booth.

This Land is *Whose* Land?
or,
All Your Mine Are Belong To *Us*

Dark, unholy powers lie here around me.
- Brunnhilde

"When Arizona Territory was separated from New Mexico Territory in 1863," writes Jim Cook, director of The Wickenburg Institute for Factual Diversity, "its northern boundary extended westward to the diagonal eastern boundary of California. What is now the chisel-shaped southern tip of Nevada was then the northwester part of Arizona. Arizona had a profile like a coffeepot, with an enlarged spout pointing toward Modesto."[1]

While it's true that Jim Cook is Arizona's Official State Liar, we have it on Biblical authority [2] that even liars can tell the truth. Not only was Las Vegas once Arizonan but the Mojave Phone Booth also came within a couple dozen miles of being an Arizona phenomenon. California's large chunk of Mojave

Desert wound up staying Californian, however, and the land on which the Mojave Phone Booth stood would eventually fall under the thumb of San Bernardino County, a massive abstraction with headquarters 175 miles and several lifestyles away.

In 1994, only three years before a lone, forgotten telephone booth morphed into The Mojave Phone Booth, a huge chunk of the Mojave - 1.6 *million* acres - came under a much larger thumb, that of the National Park Service. That 1.6 million acres unfortunately included the two ten-thousandths of an acre occupied by the Mojave Phone Booth. That measly little two ten-thousandths of an acre was to add to the already-existing tensions between Mojave Desert residents and NPS bureaucrats.

> The preserve was established as pan of the California Desert Protection Act. The legislation set aside more land than any previous conservation law in the lower 48 states.
>
> *- Los Angeles Times*

Surprisingly, *conservation* can be a squirrelly term, depending upon who is using it, as British anthropologist and indigenous rights activist Stephen Corry has pointed out:

> Conservation's achievements don't alter the fact that it's rooted in two serious and related mistakes. The first is that it conserves "wildernesses," which are imagined to be shaped only by nature. The second is that it believes in a hierarchy, with superior, intelligent human beings at the top. Many conservationists still believe that they are uniquely endowed with the foresight and expertise to control and manage so-called wildernesses and that everyone else must leave, including those who actually own them and have lived there for generations.3

Over every scrap of land on this planet, however small - even two ten-thousandths of an acre! - looms some Great Goobagoo or other, usually many more than one, all behaving as Great Goobagoos have always behaved that is in ways that would get you or I arrested and caged (by other Great Goobagoos).

It had alarmed me when the NPS became aware of our Booth visits. No good ever comes of falling within bureaucratic cross hairs. The best strategy against officialdom everywhere is that of the concentration camp: *Don't get noticed*. It's not that bureaucrats are evil people. It's that they are people, and we know what those things can be like. Grant such creatures a magical superpower called 'authority, by which they can legally commit all manner of acts we easily recognize as crimes when anyone else commits them, and you end up with what ordinary humans are trained to accept as the everyday behavior of bureaucrats.

As long as it was just a phone ringing in the desert, the bureaucrats showed no evidence of having a problem with the Booth. But now that it was attracting not only me and my goofy friends but worldwide media attention and becoming a point of interest in its own right, it was only a question of time before the NPS's local alcalde began to develop bad intentions toward it.

I didn't know it at the time, but the storm developing over the Booth

appears to have arisen from a cover-up of bureaucratic bad behavior (also known simply as bureaucratic behavior). Interest in covering up that behavior would of course not lead the guilty to welcome continued attention focused on their theater of operations. You understand the situation already if you've ever seen even a single randomly chosen episode of *Scooby-Doo*. The unfortunate difference is that at least on *Scooby-Doo* the villains never get away with it. Bureaucrats nearly always do. Also, I doubted my friends and I were up to being Meddling Kids, Inc. Most importantly, U.S. bureaucrats don't make the mistake *Scooby-Doo* villains always made, which was neglecting to be backed by the full force and credit of the most powerful bureaucracy in the history of this planet.

All of this was to have disastrously life-altering effects upon Lorene and her family.

Doc: Was the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) easier to deal with than the Park Service?
Lorene Caffee: Yeah.
Doc: When you heard the Mojave was going to become a "Preserve," did you think, "Oh, no?"
Lorene: Oh, yeah. That's what happened on our plan of operations - the reason the NPS closed us down. We had an approved plan from the BLM. They sent me letters saying we had done everything they'd asked us to do. Everything was fine. But they would not sign off on it, because they knew that it was going to go to Parks [the NPS]. Then we had to start all over with the Park Service, as though we had never submitted anything to the BLM, even though they're both under the Department of the Interior.
Doc: When the NPS came in, what was the general feeling of the people out here? Were they apprehensive, or did they think it was a good thing?
Charlie Wilcox: Well, nobody really liked it, because there are two different rules they go by. BLM had their own rules and these other people, NPS, they had their own rules, and they didn't match.
Terry Caffee: I knew Martin had an agenda.
Lorene: "Oh, no, we don't have any plans on shutting this mine down."
Terry: That was the first question I asked her: Are you gonna shut us down? "Oh, we don't have any plans to shut you down."

Lorene's daughter, Robin, wrote: "We want it to be noted that when the environmental assessment was performed by the BLM, there were neither signs nor indications that the desert tortoise represented a problem at or near the mine site." This was admitted by the NPS:

Both [Mojave National Preserve management assistant Dennis] Schramm and [Lorene's sister Sharron] Domingo said there are very few tortoises on the mine property, and most of the operations right now consist of removing stockpiled product.

- *Bakersfield Californian*, 11/06/99

Most signs that welcome you to a "National Forest" include the slogan "Land of Many Uses."

The existence of such mines illustrates another aspect of the multiple-use philosophy used to manage the public lands in the desert. On the same general acreage you may simultaneously encounter cattle grazing, a mining operation, and people experiencing educational or recreational pursuits.

- Dennis Casebier and the Friends of the Mojave Road, *Mojave Road Guide*

Not that I believe land has to justify its existence but I'm not sure I've ever seen a "Land of Many Uses" sign on any of the desert areas controlled by U.S. government employees, which seems odd, in that pounding desert ranges with high explosives is one of the favorite uses the U.S. government has for deserts, whereas somehow that very same government didn't see visiting a phone booth as a legitimate use. A certain government employee also refused to see as legitimate a tiny cinder mining operation that had preceded the NPS's sudden presence in the area by many decades.

There isn't space in this book to get into the details of the treatment of Lorene's family by government employees. Those interested can do a web search on "sue and settle" and "sweetheart suit" to get an idea of the son of shenanigans government employees get up to in collusion with certain interest groups. Let's just say that it's no surprise that when a worldwide media spotlight suddenly shone on what had probably seemed like a mostly forgotten little corner of the world, bureaucratic aim was trained on the focus of the spotlight itself: a harmless Phone Booth.

Lorene: They wanted everybody out of there.
Terry: There was too much stuff going on about Cima Mine and us.
Lorene: That's how we feel, anyway, because the phone booth became such a big thing.
Doc: They say they want people to come in, but then they were complaining that, what, thirty people a month or something were going out there. And they were staying on the roads. It's not as though they were off-roading. They were driving on established roads.
Lorene: You and I both know it was because of the mine.
Doc: But it was just so *mean*. [*Laughter*] People are mean, but people are mean for reasons.
Terry: Those folks have an agenda.
Lorene: They had shut our mine down after the phone booth thing got really big. That's when it got on the websites that our mine had been shut down and they were getting a lot of pressure - a lot of pressure. Mary Martin and Diane Feinstein, our fine senator, were.
Doc: Mary Martin accuses me of getting people to issue death threats against her.
Lorene: Hey, go on the Internet and see what they say about us on the National Park Service website.
Doc: Are you talking about that *Administrative History* Martin commissioned?
Lorene: Yes, where it says that Terry and I threatened to kill anybody that shut our mine down? Talk about slander! I don't think it's a darn bit funny. Ninety percent of what they've got written in there is incorrect.
Doc: Speaking for the stuff that's written about me, much is incorrect.
Terry: Lot of inaccuracies in there.
Doc: But now i's "history," I suppose.

Although I hadn't been pleased when people tried to turn the Booth's notoriety to their own purposes, I convinced myself it wouldn't be out of place to publicize the Ray family's Cuna Mine struggle by putting up a few pages on the Booth's website about it and posting messages people sent in support of the Ray family. I understood that by highlighting the Ray family's fight against the planet's most powerful government I might be tying the Booth's fate to that of the family's mine. But it seemed to be the only ethically sound course of action, even if it seemed, let us say, strategically dubious.

NOTES

1 "Retrieving Las Vegas" in *The Journal of Prevention: The Most Trusted Name in Lying*

2 Titus 1:12-13

3 "The Colonial Origins of Conservation: The Disturbing History Behind US National Parks" (http://www.truth-out.org/ opinion/ item/32487-the-colonial-origins-of-conservation-the-disturbing-history-behind-us-national-parks)

BOOTHOGRAPHY V

LOCAL BOOTH MEMORIES

Dennis Casebier and the Friends of the Mojave Road produced a set of four books that describe the entire Mojave Trail, mile by mile, noting everything of interest, down to the smallest detail. Yet on a map in the volume that covers the area of the Booth, *Guide to the East Mojave Heritage Trail: Ivanpah to Rocky Ridge*, the Booth is noted on the map merely as "TELEPHONE," while in the text a telephone booth sitting all alone in desert remoteness merited only the terse sentence, "There is a telephone on the left in about two miles," underscoring that although the Booth functioned as a pattern interrupt for outsiders, locals tended to see the Booth's function solely in terms of its original purpose.

Doc: It never struck you as odd, the juxtaposition of a phone booth out in the desert?
Lorene Caffee: Not to me. Not to us. When mother and dad first moved out there, we used to ride our horses down to the Phone Booth,just because that was a place to ride to. You know?
Doc: I guess that's about the same as what we did. We took a ride because the Phone Booth was a destination.
Robin Storti: I do not remember the Booth because to me it probably wasn't that big of a deal. It was there, but grandpa went there to make phone calls. But it wasn't one of our spots to go see when we came to visit.
Carrie (Ray) Heintzen: I saw it when I was a kid. I saw it when I was little. I just never thought anything about it. I don't think anybody in our family really did. It was just a phone booth to us, you know? Something people used for their practical purposes, you know? I never thought anything about it.
Doc: So it never struck any of you as odd, just the way it looked out there - the contrast?
Lorene: I guess it should've, but it didn't.
Bob Ray: To us, it was a necessity. It was something we had to put in. When we needed to call for something, we could do it. Another benefit was that my baby sister - she was quite a lot younger than the rest of the family - my mother would drive her down to the highway and if she

broke down or there was a flash flood or something like that, she could get ahold of people to come and help her from down at Stuckey's. At that time it was a Stuckey's - the building where the road store is now. Because she had to drive the thirteen miles out every day and then pick her up in the evening when it was time for school to be out. So it was beneficial in a lot of ways to us.
Charlie Wilcox: I didn't know enough about the places around here, to know why they'd have a phone booth settin' out there.
Doc: Did it seem strange to you?
Charlie: Yeah, well, it seemed strange, a phone booth off out an a dirt road. Then again, the road was being maintained, too. See, we graded and drug the road two or three times a week. It was for eighteen wheelers to run. You could drive seventy miles an hour down through here.
Robin: I cannot remember going to the Phone Booth as an event itself. It might have been as we were driving somewhere else. "Oh, yeah - there's the Phone Booth." So it wasn't like a major memory of mine of that area. It served a purpose. But I forgot about it. Shooting fireworks off in the cinder cones? Now that's a memory, you know? Being somewhere in the world that no one else is? That's a memory. But it wasn't until you brought the Booth up that I went, "That really is a weird phenomenon!"

THEN THE DEVIL IS SIX

THE BOOTH GETS RELIGION
(OR VICE VERSA)

> Whenever I stumble onto some secret national treasure, I try to keep quiet. I say try, because the first instinct is to show it off like a prize arrow, to drag a friend or group of friends there to admire it, to experience it multiplied through others' delight. But the upshot is obvious: they would tell their friends, who would tell their friends, and the squads would descend. Sera sharers are rare, and seldom keep their mouths shut oocc you have opened your own.
>
> - Bruce Berga

[*Cough*] Well, fair enough, and in that connection I'll mention that for the third year in a row a number of us planned a pre-Burning Man Booth rendezvous. If by the end of 1999 a little of the bloom was off the Booth for me, a little of the bloom was off Burning Man too. It wasn't that Burning Man had ceased to be fun (or was "over," as many of us who used to go to Burning Man enjoyed announcing annually). Had that been the case, I wouldn't have been returning to Black Rock Desert. But my enthusiasm wasn't as great as in the past. The more people found out about Burning Man, the more people went to Burning Man, the more incentive bureaucrats had to butt in and force unnecessary rules and onerous fees upon peaceful people freely gathering in the middle of a remote desert, fully cognizant of the risks. Burning Man was being leaned on by The Man, and hard. Consequently, as our pal Dr. Brody

Culpepper observed at the time, "Burning Man is just like Disneyland - except with more rules."

This would be my sixth visit to the Booth and there was no predicting what it would be like. The Mojave Phone Booth was now making its own adventures.

In years past, I had posted the dates of our visit on the Internet so we could take calls from people curious to know about the Mojave Phone Booth, or Burning Man, or how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop. This time I did not announce our visit publicly but instead formulated a project, half of which was to be completed at the Booth, the other half in Black Rock City. I announced our visit only via the official Burning Man house organ, *The Jackrabbit Speaks*.

> **Mojave Phone Booth/ Burning Man Linkup**
> We're marking the 3rd annual pre-Burning Man visit to the Mojave Phone Booth with a linkup between the two. This time we won't be doing any pr-visit press, because we want to take phone calls exclusively from people who will be attending Burning Man 99. Phone in & you'll answer a series of painfully personal and humiliating questions and get a secret password that you can use to obtain fabulous prizes at Deuce of Clubs. We'll be between Saturn & Uranus, alongside Disgruntled Postal Workers/ Portland Cacophany/ Art Kars/ &c....Just look for the four-foot-tall playing card disguised as the Deuce of Clubs Mystery Vending Machine

If anyone needed concrete proof of the gospel claim that "the last shall be first," there it was, in the spectacle of the world's most remote phone booth being also its most famous phone booth. Even so, I had never expected it to be explicitly co-opted for gospel missionary work:

> Chris L.:
> When I read about the phone booth in Travel & Leisure magazine, I just had to check out your website (very clever and interesting). And I HAD to call the phone number. Unfortunately, someone did answer, immediately started a recording (saying it was NOT a recording), which launched into a religious statement. Not that I am against religion, but this was NO fun at all - I wanted to talk to a real person. I'm afraid, at least for the moment, that your fun fone booth is in trouble.

An email from Esther in Germany confirmed the news but added that this was no recording.

> I am reading this little thing in a computer magazine, and there is a neat picture of the booth - and of course curious me has to call right away. Now was I surprised to hear someone answer right away. The man who answered said that yes indeed he was sitting out in the desert, "just camping out" as he called it and asked my name and blessed me. Well I blessed him back, although he had not sneezed, and hung up, slightly bewildered.

A web search brought up a few newspaper articles about the Booth mentioning that some guy named Karr, a 51-year-old from Texas by way of Bullhead City, Arizona had recently commandeered the Booth to deliver his message from on high to callers worldwide, claiming (of course) that God had told him to do it. One article said he'd been an alcoholic or a junkie or something.

I dialed the Booth's number myself to listen to the man's spiel, then had a brief conversation with him. It turned out that not only was he proselytizing at the Booth but also fasting - one of the surest ways to induce a visionary state in the desert. When he claimed God had told him to journey to a telephone in the Mojave, I mentioned the telephone over in Lanfair and asked how he knew God didn't mean the non-famous one. Unfazed, he instantly answered, "Well, He gave me the choice. I chose this one." It struck me as odd that The Almighty somehow hadn't managed to hear about the Booth before I had, or at least before the world's media outlets had. But Karr didn't care. As one article noted, the man was "taking his work seriously. 'It's becoming a spiritual aphrodisiac,' he said."

Oh, for the days when it was a Hindu god answering the phone with his non-religious pitch consisting of broad hints about free doodads! One member of our group was nervous about sleeping at the Booth with this religious guy hanging around, which made sense - after all, isn't "God told me to do it" the reason many psycho killers offer after getting caught?

I wasn't afraid to meet the guy, I just wasn't eager to meet a religious fanatic, especially at a spot that had become for me, in a thoroughly non-religious way, almost sacred.

An email correspondent told me he and his friends had run across Karr at the Booth and that he'd written out directions on how to be baptized and then tried to talk them into helping him use the white stones with which we'd laid out the Booth's number to instead spell out the letters G-O-D.

I guess I should have expected something like this. As the Booth's fame had grown, many people had tried to use the Booth's fame to further various agendas. This guy wasn't even the first religious enthusiast to do so. I learned by growing up Baptist that one has to be careful what one says around sermonizers because they're liable to twist almost anything into a sermon illustration. Enjoy a few Booth centric examples from various religious newsletters and websites:

> Most likely if you call the desert phone the line will be busy. However, you can place a call to an even better place called Heaven where the line is never busy simply by bowing your head, and closing your eyes. "Dear Father in Heaven ... "
>
> -The Desert Phone," *The Burning Bush Devotional*, September 27, 1999

> In this self-reliant age of science and cynicism, many people see prayer as a parallel to that now-phantom phone booth. In their minds, it had its use, years ago, but the world has moved on and prayer has been left behind, a faded symbol of a simpler, less sophisticated time. (...] Remember your first real connection? Maybe you reached out to God just out of curiosity, not knowing what to expect - or expecting nothing - and were astounded to get an answer.
>
> - "Ringing, In the New Year," in *Cross Current*, January 2, 2005

> Some people (*obviously with too much time on their hands*) [*emphasis added*] are journeying to the desert for the express purpose of answering the phone and reassuring the caller that, yes, the story is true.
> [...]
> Perhaps I am reading too much into this. The fact that a good news message, delivered via the Son of God, emerged from a desert landscape and spread throughout the world - long before the

first computer was ever created - gives us pause to consider that the Gospel needs no gimmicks - needs no novelty.

- "Deep in the Desert," in *Central News*, June, 2000

Pacific Bell removed the "Mojave Phone Booth" that had been in service for more than thirty years; the voice in the desert disappeared. After thousands of years, the original bush that Moses saw is long gone. But that doesn't mean that God's voice is silenced! As you hear God's call through the Word, are you ready to "pick up the phone"?

- A Voice in the Desert," in *Parkey' Bible Study Outlines*

People who read the story stared calling the number. Most of the time no one answered. [...] Compare this foolishness to Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. That garden was also a deserted place - especially at night - when Jesus went there. But He went with friends, not searching for them. He was seeking to make a connection, but He wasn't in doubt. He talked frequently with the Father, and so He could always expect "someone to answer when He called."

- "Hello? Is Anyone There?" by "C.R.B."

Hrm. A little too much Aesop in the diet, if you ask me. A more intellectualized religious analysis came from a member of the "International Fellowship of St Bruno":

The nowhereness of the desert and its sublime call is exemplified in the recent cult fascination with the Mojave Desert phone booth. Hundreds of persons each week now call this telephone where mostly there is no one but where some pilgrims have traveled, in an ambiguous mix of delusion and inspiration, to answer these calls from those who wish to make "contact" with silent traces of the unspeakable divine, the God of negative theology. The Mojave Desert telephone is a symptom of an uncanny contemporary secular eremiticism.

- The Post-Modem Desert: Solitude and Community in Cyberspace."
by IFSB Member Elisha J. Emery Obi. OSB Camaldolcse

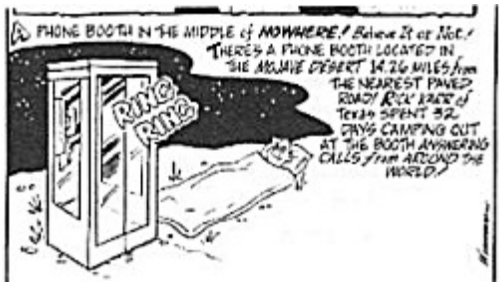
Seems to me it'd be quite a chore to have to come up with far-fetched religious harangues but then again, as the man used to sing, "Gonna be a Baptist preacher/ So I don't have to work"

Apart from religious crusaders there were other Booth issues to worry about Filmmaker Karen G. reported going back to the Booth to finish shooting a short film only to find that SOMEONE HAD TAKEN EVERYTHING OUT OF THE BOOTH. We were really ticked. Charlie Wilcox told us that someone had just done it over the weekend. So it is BARE. There is NOTHING. Even the cool signs that were posted outside the booth are gone."

Such a dastardly act bore the all-too-familiar stink of official involvement, a suspicion that would be confirmed years later, when a someone using an account registered in the name of a former NPS ranger would contact me to try to sell me one of those stolen objects.

I had plenty of time to think about all these things on the way to the Booth because once again I was driving a vehicle that had no business trying to traverse deserts. It was the same little Toyota pickup I'd driven on the Booth blizzard trip but it was now capable of putt-putting along at no more than 50

m.p.h. or else the engine would overheat, thanks to the oversized camper loaded onto its bed. The only way to keep the temperature gauge even close to within the upper end of the normal range was to drive slowly and keep the heater turned on full blast You can imagine what great fun that is in the summertime.


A PHONE BOOTH IN THE MIDDLE of NOWHERE! Believe It or Not!
THERE'S A PHONE BOOTH LOCATED IN THE MOJAVE DESERT 14.26 MILES from THE NEAREST PAVED ROAD! RICK RACE of Texas SPENT 32 DAYS CAMPING OUT AT THE BOOTH ANSWERING CALLS from AROUND THE WORLD!
RING RING

Once arrived at the Booth - believe it or not, the poor truck made the trip without incident - our apprehension about the religious guy turned out to be mostly unfounded. He seemed like a pretty good old guy, really. I've been around nutty religious folk all my life, even was one for a time, and you can trust me when I say he could easily have been much, much nuttier. He spoke a brief piece to us about god and then, having gotten that off his chest, he was just a regular, pleasant person with us the rest of the time. In fact, we kind of got a kick out of him.

At this stage of the Booth's fame, our not having announced our visit in advance made no difference at all to the call volume. The moment we'd hangup the receiver, the phone would start ringing again. Despite how hard it now was to connect to the Booth's line, many Burning Man-bound callers were succeeding. The Burning Man organizers that year had banished us to the outer reaches of the playa where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth, so I came up with a Booth-related gimmick in hopes of drawing people out to visit our camp. I brought along a dictionary and asked each Burning Man-bound caller to choose a number from 1 to 666. From the correspondingly-numbered page, I would randomly point to a dictionary word that became the caller's password, which I'd write on a list next to the person's name for verification at Burning Man, where I awarded prizes to all who showed up to claim them.

It's serious business awarding crappy prizes to strangers so I continued to take calls after the others turned in for the night, wanting to take as many calls as possible. Unfortunately, one person in our party, someone who tagged along with one of the members of our crew, loudly objected that the ringing of the phone and the sound of my voice were disturbing his beauty rest, which he needed because, as he'd reminded us repeatedly, the next morning he was leaving us to attend his 10-year high school reunion.

Given that my involvement with government schools was involuntary, I can't imagine voluntarily attending a high school reunion. Maybe you can imagine why someone twitterpated at the thought of facing former fellow inmates would schedule a desert outing on the way and then pitch his tent

right next to a constantly ringing telephone but I can't.

Nowadays, I'd probably either ignore him or maybe even make a concerted effort to talk even louder and cut the conversations short so the phone would ring more. (Not to go all Paul Harvey on you but this guy went on to coin an Internet term you all use every day. Had he disappeared that night into a shallow desert grave, no one would ever have had to hear that horrid neologism *blog*. Do I owe the world an apology?)

He was a friend or acquaintance of someone in our group, so for her sake I reluctantly packed it in and went to bed. I must have been a nicer person in those days. I was really unhappy about it, though. Imagine how much more unhappy I was a short time later, after the Booth was gone. On what turned out to be my final visit to the Mojave Phone Booth, I was cheated out of taking part in an extraordinary activity that was no longer possible to do so that someone could rest up to take pan in a painfully ordinary activity that anyone can do who wants to, with or without rest.

What's that? Am I still angry? WHY, DO I SEEM ANGRY? (I'm kidding. I'm sure he's a perfectly nice person.)

As for the religious guy, it was later rumored that he ended up in the hospital, which wouldn't be surprising, for a 50+-year-old skinny guy exposed to a month's worth of desert summer heat. I wanted to interview him for this book but the Holy Ghost who sent him to a phone booth seems to have sent him right out of the phone directory and into oblivion.

As for the rest of us, we headed off to Nevada, not knowing that none of us would ever see the Mojave Phone Booth again.

BOOTHOGRAPHY VI

THAT FIRST CALL

> I once saw a man passing a phone booth at the moment it rang. He hesitated then, at the second ring, answered it. It couldn't possibly have been for him. I copied down the numbers of several phones in Grand Central Station & Kenndy Airport, and called these numbers. Almost always, someone answered. When I asked why they answerd, they said, "Because it rang."
>
> - Edmund Carpenter,
> *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!*

Doc: Let's talk about the phone as you used it, before everybody knew about it.
Lorene Caffee: Just like we did the day you called.
Doc: Right. You would use the Phone Booth how often?
Lorene: Two or three times a week, at least.
Terry Caffee: Up until we got our cell phones.
Doc: Didn't you say it was cheaper to use the Booth?
Lorene: Oh, yeah. Sure. At that time, I don't remember if we were still using coins. I had been using a calling card at the time you first called and I answered.
Terry: You and Lynn went over there in - what was it, '96?
Doc: '97.
Lorene: No...

At this point Lorene consulted a notebook next to her that turned out to be a printout of my own website! This was an even stranger experience than seeing photos from Charlie's scrapbook. Here was my own website, being quoted back to me.

Lorene: [*Reads from printout*] Yep. May 26, 1997.
Doc: I couldn't tell, when you answered the phone that first time, what you thought about the whole thing.
Lorene: I was amused!
Doc: I couldn't tell. *Is she annoyed? Is she just kind of bemused?*
Lorene: The phone had never rang before. When a phone rings, you answer it, right?

With Lorene at the time I called was her friend Lynn Mcintire, whose late husband Carl had worked at the Cima Mine.

Doc: The day I called, after Lorene hung up and got back in the truck with you, what did she say?
Lynn Mcintire: She said, *This guy named Godfrey as on the phone and he's from Arizona,* and I said What? We were laughing about it so much. Both of us were extremely surprised.
Doc: I couldn't tell what Lorene's attitude was, whether I'd annoyed her, or what.
Robin Storti: Believe me, she was thrilled, too. You were her link to the outside world!
Lynn: Well, actually, because of the fact that they had the mine, things were kind of low-key out there, as far as strangers. So it was just kind of surprising when we happened to be there and it rang. It was quite interesting, that was for sure. It was really funny. Lorene and I had gone over to the Phone Booth so she could make some phone calls, and I needed to make some phone calls. She had gotten in the phone booth first, and whoever it was she was calling, the line was busy. So she came out of the phone booth and came back over to the truck, and we were standing there talking when it rang. And it was you. So, since she was already out of the truck, she answered the phone.
Doc: So it could have been you.
Lynn: Yes, it could have just as easily been me, but she was the one that was out of the truck and I was still sitting in the truck and so that's how you happened to talk to Lorene.

The next Booth gathering would be my chance to meet Lorene in person, finally.

Or would have been.

WHIP IT

VISIT NO. 7

THE PHANTOM VISIT

Heavy rains in the Mojave not long after my sixth visit washed waves of sand over the trails, erecting an all but impassable barrier in the path of most vehicles, as many Booth seekers found out the hard way. The NPS-forced mine shutdowns had taken an even harder toll upon the roads, which had heretofore been well maintained by the mine operators. Conditions on unmaintained dirt roads can go from bad to worse overnight. The more time that passed after the NPS ran the Caffees off their tiny mining claim, "the worse the roads got," says Charlie Wilcox, "and the more people wanted to use 'em. I got in trouble [with the NPS], because I took the road grader out there." Whatever it means when bureaucrats "administer" an area, it clearly doesn't mean they intend to take it upon themselves to maintain the area's roads, especially not a road leading to a Phone Booth whose very existence they begrudged.

Even apart from the troubling problem of officialdom, I wasn't sure that a phone booth sitting out on the Mojave could survive being an attraction. Emails requesting directions continued to pour in at Deuce of Clubs, increasing my fear for the well-being of both Booth visitors (should they go into the desert unprepared) and for the Booth itself (should NPS bureaucrats decide they'd had enough intrusions upon their new domain).

I continued to agree to as few interviews as I could. When I gave one, I always tried to get in a word or two of caution, as in this August, 1999 *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article by the late Warren Bates: The booth, Daniels said, is almost getting to the point where it's too well-known. 'I dread the day

that someone goes out there and dies looking for (it),' he said." Having grown up in the desert, I was used to hearing about desert casualties and wanted no part of any causal chain that might lead to one. That was no idle fear. As I mentioned earlier, a European U2 fan and his wife would later die of exposure while trying to find the Joshua tree that appeared on a U2 album cover, and from what I've heard, that site was much easier to reach than the Booth site. Bates also talked to Dennis Casebier, who sounded a similarly cautious note: "If you're not used to the desert, you don't go out there lightly." But Casebier was more optimistic than I was. "I think if people would get away from their TV sets a little more, and if it takes a phone booth to do that, they'll be better off," Cascbier said. "But stop and look around a little bit, and tread lightly. It's a wonderful place here."

Inside of a week, as if to underscore my fears, Bates forwarded to me an email he had received:

> A listener to our "Action Guys" radio show was overcome with the lure of "the phone booth" this past week. His name is Tom. On Tuesday, he called us and said he'd go out and try to find it, using the article and his knowledge of the area. Wednesday he called from his big-rig to say he had been up and down the Cima Road, but couldn't spot it. Thursday, we got a call from a fellow employee of Tom's, who told us he was in hot water at work, because his boss had heard the call the previous day, and he wasn't supposed to be on the Cima Road. On Friday, Tom calls on his cell phone, and says he is walking on the power line road toward the phone booth. He had taken his private vehicle to the road, only to have it get stuck in sand a couple of miles in. Through the course of the show, he phoned in on his cell during the walk, gradually getting more tired, describing the scenery along the way. Then, just a few minutes before our show ended at 9:00, Tom sighted the booth, and a few minutes later made the call. We had him hangup, and called back just to make sure, and he answered "Hot Tall 105-1!"

That guy's story worked out okay, but not everyone who got stuck on the way to the Booth would be capable of hoofing it back to safety. Some might say that a person who dies out in the desert is a person who was making an insufficient effort *not* to die. One might call it suicide by stupidity. Each morning the fear loomed in the back of my mind that this might be the day I would receive an email or phone call from a reporter asking me how I felt that my project had lured some person or persons to a needless death.

"I promise Ill be cool"

> When a reporter sits down at the typewriter, he's nobody's friend.
> - Theodore H. White

> Never trust a journalist, he'll betray you every time.
> - Joan Didion

As with the approach of the year 1000, the approach of the year 2000 caused a great deal of groundless fear. Voices everywhere were jabbering about he "Y2K bug" and urging people to stockpile water, food, and ammo.

That's never bad advice to the desert-bred way of thinking, and I wasn't entirely against the idea of the Y2K bug bringing down the financial world (perhaps in some way metaphorically reminiscent of the ending of *Fight Club*). However, in that I considered it a near certainty that neither the world nor its financial systems would be altered in any noticeable way as December 31, 1999 handed things over to January 1, 2000, my idea for the next Booth visit, over New Year's Eve, was to recast the Booth for one night as a situation room (this pre-dated Wolf Blitzer's TV show of that name) to recontextualize calls from around the world as situation reports," documenting the almost certain no-show of Y2K disasters anywhere on the planet.

As I expected, not only did the Y2K bug not threaten world finance or food supplies, it didn't even threaten the supply chain of my favorite Ferrara Pan candies. As apocalypses go, it was the biggest fizzle since the world failed to end the previous time it was predicted, and also the time before, and the hundreds of times before that. ("Apocalypse never" is the lesson we probably should have learned by now.)

My Y2K Booth plan was a fizzle, too, but it wasn't ruined by anything so common as the absence of an apocalypse. No, it was ruined instead by something even more common: reporters.

On a discussion group we called P3 (take it on faith that you don't want to know what P3 stood for), a listserv my friends and I used for making our Mojave Phone Booth and Burning Man plans, Krishna wrote concerning the Y2K Booth Project, "I think Godfrey for certs will be there come rain, sleet or a not-so-sudden flurry of media activity." Krishna was two-thirds correct. Rain or sleet I can handle, but the media flurry had finally gotten to me.

Before continuing, I'd like to emphasize again that there were many good eggs among the reporters I ran across (such as the late Mr. Bates, previously mentioned). Unfortunately, they were vastly outnumbered by bad eggs.

> Hey. My name is [*name redacted*] and I'm a reporter for [*monstrously huge daily newspaper*] and I'm very interested in doing a story about the Mojave Desert phone booth that you've made so famous. I hope you're not too played out on the press after those TV jerks. I promise I'll be cool.

At this stage in the game I should not have needed a hat and a peep stone to have divined exactly what "I promise I'll be cool" would turn out to mean. Because who says, "I'll be cool?" People who are not cool. Anyone who says "I'll be cool" might as well have a giant forehead tattoo that says "I AM A JACKASS! RUN!"

It wasn't hard to turn down an interview when, say, someone pompously

wrote, "Hello! I'm a freelance writer in Santa Fe, with a long list of credits." It was a different category of problem altogether whenever it was a reporter from a large news organization wanting to write a Booth article. There had been a time when my refusal to do an interview meant the end of that article about the Booth. That time was long past. Now there was a story with or without my participation, partly because there were now any number of strangers either peripherally or not at all involved with the Booth story who were nonetheless more than willing to insert themselves into it so they could siphon attention to their website or product or just to get their name and mug in the media. Turns out, an awful lot of people are kind of awful that way.

The "I'll be cool" reporter from the giant newspaper contacted me again.

> hey godfrey!!!!
> are you there, my friend?
> i'm making some calls and ran into a cupla other websites from mojave phone booth fans.
> and who is this andrea babe from new york? how do i reach her?

"*... this andrea babe*"- oof. The guy seemed like a total meatball. So why did I end up deciding to do the interview, anyway? Because I thought I should at least try to tamp things down a little to keep the Booth from annoying the Federales enough to cause them to go on the attack against it. Somehow I *still* hadn't learned that trying to control the media is like trying to ride a cartoon fire hose.

Surprisingly the guy seemed only ordinarily annoying when I talked to him on the phone. I was really cringing, though, when he emailed after the interview.

> so gaodrey, thaks for the lede on what will be a very funny story ... just wanted to clarify one thing with you..i hope it's accurate to say that, in very general terms, that this guy sees the phone symbol on a map and decides to go out to investigate. he writes a little pice for a 'zine, and includes the booth's number. you see the net piece and get cyurious and start calling the numbre... and the rest is history ...
>
> ps ... by the way, when is burning man? and you got any suggestions about some prelim story i could do for my paper? any controversy surrounding this year's event? where is it anyway? do the locals mind ya'll coming out there?
>
> i'm fishing man. throw me a bone. later.

I hoped his article writing would turn out to be better than his email writing. I was worried because he had asked about my plans for my next visit and, in a moment of inexcusable mental weakness, I had agreed to tell him, provided he promise to keep it off the record. The same thing happened around this same time with another reporter I foolishly agreed to talk to. Even after so many disappointments in my dealings with reporters, somehow I still wanted to trust them when they solemnly gave me their word.

I'm sure you have guessed that they both included my off-the-record plans in their articles. Of *course* they did. And one of those articles appeared in one of the country's largest newspapers and was therefore reproduced in newspapers worldwide. Of *course* it was.

Reporters confronted about their behavior repeat the formulaic response "I'm just doing my job," the excuse universally resorted to by people who know that what they do in exchange for money is not honorable. That reporter did a couple of other shady things I won't go into except to say that reporters doing fluff stories who encounter nothing but fluff sometimes like to stir up shit for the benefit of their story. And make no mistake, it is their story, not yours (and certainly not the truth), that will be told.

After the article came out, Andrea's comment was brief and to the point: "Stupid piece, that's all." The worst part was the ruination of the next visit, which, because of governmental machinations I was hearing about from the Ray family, I had been telling friends might very well be our final chance to see the Booth.

The article prompted Californians who hadn't noticed the Booth in any of its other media appearances to begin trooping out in numbers large enough that even indolent bureaucrats could hardly fail to notice. A Deuce of Clubs reader emailed, "After today's article, the lone phone booth might become a very busy place." "Busy" is a relative term, of course, but visits did increase.

"The one thing that irritates the publicity-shy Daniels most is that his plans for a millennium celebration at the booth were revealed by one media outlet," wrote the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Much later even the NPS's official "Administrative History" of the area mentioned the debacle:

> [A large newspaper] reported Daniels' plans for a Y2K celebration at the booth, and the deluge of self-invitations from people who wanted to be part of the action convinced Daniels to stay away.

Andrea wrote to ask, "How have you been able to maintain your involvement and enthusiasm for lo, these many years re: the booth? Aside from the few recent press requests, I'm getting dozens of e-mails a day about it. I've been sitting here for ten minutes and eight separate messages have come in about it. I know you've been getting many, many times that, and for a LOT longer."

Robin, Lorene's daughter, asked, "How are you doing with all this exposure? You seem concerned that the booth is getting overexposed. Are you concerned they will take it out? Have they made any signs to? I also read that you are keeping the Booth site up because of the mine. Thank you." Sharron, Lorene's sister, wrote, "I hope you still enjoy it as much as the rest of us. Again, I want to thank you for your effort on our behalf."

I was still enjoying the Booth, but I did wish the attention would die down. I tend to think that it's next to impossible for almost any human effort or undertaking to become huge and simultaneously remain entirely salutary. As Robin mentioned, I was by that point using the Booth site mostly to post information about what gave every appearance of being an NPS vendetta against Lorene and her family.

My forebodings increased when Robin passed along some news from Lorene:

My mom just called me to tell me that all the people that were camping at the phone booth go kicked off and all the signs taken down. So much for the area being a national park.

Friends of mine wondered how long it could continue. Rob Cockerham of Cockeyed.com asked, "After they have the 2008 Olympic games at the Mojave Phone Booth, and you complete work on Boothland, the Mojave's finest Family Fun Park, what will you do?" Burning Man bartender extraordinaire TomCat wanted to know, "What's next? A resort? An Indian casino? A gas station? A family diner? A truck stop? Tract housing?"

During the Booth Blizzard visit, I had told the *New Times* reporter, "I wouldn t want this to be something where 500 people showed up all at once. You'd have people making a mess in the desert." As if on cue, someone wrote to tell of a plan he and his friends had concocted to have bands play at the Booth. In view of the growing rage inside the NPS, a concert at the Booth sounded like a really bad idea. I wrote back as quickly as I could:

we do have a project/event planned for that time (if you're talking about the very end of this year). you are most welcome to join in! [...] what we will be doing is something more low-key and, um ... informational.

I hated to be a party pooper and was glad that the band and their friends understood and decided to visit the Booth on August 21 instead of on New Year's Eve. Such was the state of interest in the Booth at the time that even this abortive Booth plan was written up newspapers. A follow-up article chronicling the outcome was entitled, "The party never starts at desert phone booth" because only a handful of people showed up.

The New Year's gathering was much larger, with 30 to 40 participants. "And *you* didn't show up," Lorene scolded me later. Admittedly, it was sort of funny, in that the gathering had been my idea in the first place. The NPS took notice of the New Year's gathering too, to put it mildly. "Oh, the Park Service was having a cow over it," Lorene told me.

Given subsequent events, of course I wish I had gone. I would have had fun and I would have gotten to meet Lorene in person years sooner than I ended up doing. I did talk to Lorene via telephone when she was at the Booth that night, but after that I mostly stopped dialing the Booth's number. Maybe it was fitting that Lorene sort of bookended my telephoning the Booth.

Hoaxing Time?

Information wants to be free, the saying goes, but it turns out that certain information also wants to be secret. And therein lies the tension The more people you knew and talked to, the more you were likely to learn interesting things, but it was also more likely that you might get caught or the cool things you knew about would go away.

An especially devout Christian I once knew was also a great admirer of North American tribal cultures. These two passions warred in his mind and finally troubled him enough that he cautiously opined aloud, "You know ... even though Europeans brought Jesus to the Indians ... I *almost* think they *might* have been better off as they were." In that few among us will have even heard of all the tribes that lived in the Americas before Europeans landed, I can't see how it's even debatable that those people weren't better off alive and thriving rather than conquered, plundered, and torn asunder,Jesus or no.

I began to wonder whether something similar might be true of the Mojave Phone Booth and whether I was in some sense the Booth's hapless Columbus.

What I thought I had done was to remap the Booth as a pattern interrupt, a project in perspective shift. That seemed to work until the engines of mass culture sucked it in and recast it as a "human interest story." I wasn't sure I could defend the idea that the media's recasting was co-optive whereas my remapping wasn't (but I almost certainly did believe that).

I have to admit I got a little peevish about it for a while there. I may have started to become one of those people who dislikes claptrap being taught to children not simply because it's claptrap but because it differs from the claptrap they were taught.

Even before the Y2K New Year's fiasco, I had been wondering whether it might be possible to save the Booth by shutting down the phenomenon just long enough for the hubbub to die down a little. I tried to come up with some sort of Edward Scissorhands ending for the Booth, one that might enable it to be withdrawn from worldwide gaze, if only temporarily, without actually being destroyed.

A few friends suggested we actually remove the Booth ourselves. There was no way I was going to physically assault the Booth but it seemed to me that maybe a hoax was in order. Hadn't some reporters at first suspected the Booth tale to be a hoax, anyway? Could I digitally alter some photos of the Booth to make it appear that the NPS had removed it, as I already feared would happen? Or could we float rumors of the deaths of some Booth visitors, via either foul play or exposure?

It didn't take a lot of thought to realize those plans wouldn't work ... The snag was that the Booth would continue to exist and operate. Even if we pulled some trick to make it seem as if it had been removed, it would take only one of the many people trekking out to the Mojave to report back to the Internet that the Booth was still there. Not even the cooperation of every person in the area whom the media might contact for confirmation would have sufficed because by that stage in the Booth's fame reporters would have traveled out in person to verify the Booth's demise (as in fact they did later when it disappeared for real).

Instead of a hoax, could the Booth instead be temporarily locked down, with keys available only to locals? Not feasibly. First of all, in a deserted

place, few things can truly be secured. And what about emergency situations? Most importantly, what right had we to do any such thing? None at all.

I floated the idea of posting a "BOOTH CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE" sign at the Aiken Mine Road turnoff but wondered how effective it might be and how long it might remain undisturbed. Krishna suggested we "make a really professional sign, saying 'Road Out' or something. Then, below that, place a homemade sign out of lined paper, as if it were a frantic note made by an unfortunate visitor, telling everyone that 'Yes, the road's out, and boy did we ever have a sucky time getting stuck.' You could make a bunch of these and have Charlie put them up every now and then after they blow away."

It seemed doubtful I could count on Charlie's cooperation in that. He was having so much fun with the Booth and its visitors. Besides, interfering with his enjoyment would be kind of finky. And as the Professor pointed out, the NPS would almost certainly remove the sign in spite of the fact that such a sign would serve their interests. Nevertheless, a Deuce of Clubs reader did have a warning sign made.

> From: Jeff and Marti
> Date: Fri, 20 Aug 1999
> My sign guy made a GIANT sign for the road but I'm not really happy with it. He used a four foot square (diamond) warning sign and convened it to read: "Warning Soft Roadbed Ahead." The Sign used to be a Soft Shoulder sign. I don't think it is sufficient to warn people but I'll install it anyway. I'm thinking of adding a small "Four Wheel Drive Recommended" below it.

We never did figure out a way to pilot the Mojave Phone Booth to a gear-up landing. The *Katha Upanishad* alleges that there's cooperation even between slayer and slam yet somehow we couldn't even manage to devise a plan for the Booth to cooperate in the slaying of its fame. I had finally accepted that events would just have to play out however they played out when visions of a different type of hoax danced in my head, thanks to TV personality Montel Williams.

"Are the other Godfreys dentists?"

> Tom Jeffords, like other pioneers, was not above "stuffing" an inquisitive tenderfoot - a fact which may account for some or the unverifiable legends which come to the surface from time to time.
>
> - C. L. Sonnichsen [1]

> Once the dime novelists and theater agents had latched onto her, Calamity Jane probably realized nobody wanted the truth. They wanted what we call today "the juice" and what people in Jane's era called "tossing in another grizzly."
>
> - John Ames, *The Real Deadwood*

> [Tom] Lehrer even once considered hiring someone to play him. "One or my fantasies was that I could coach someone to go out and sing my songs. I'd stay home and we'd split, fifty-fifty."
>
> - Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny*

The Booth had been overexposed in newspapers and on radio and television, often with my now partially regrettable collusion. It had even begun appearing on daytime TV shows such as *The Roseanne Show* and *Oprah*. Media outlets more goofy than before began calling, such as *Inside Edition*. Some Discovery Channel show even wanted to tag along on my next visit. The most dogged in its pursuit of me was a daytime show that regularly featured psychics and other nonsense. I regarded the Booth as nonsense, sure, but not that kind of nonsense.

> My name is Annette [*redacted*] and I am a news coordinator at the Montel Williams Show in NYC. Please contact me at your earliest convenience about the work you do with the isolated phone booth in the Mojave Desert.

I had a little laugh over the pairing of "news coordinator" and *The Montel Williams Show* (and another over "the work you do") but aside from that I paid no further attention to the email. Many are the things I do not know, but one thing I did know is that I would not be appearing on *The Montel Williams Show*.

Unfortunately, there were things *The Montel Williams Show* refused to know. I ignored further requests from them until one afternoon I came home from work and found a hand-written note on my door. It was from a neighbor a few blocks away whom I'd never met. Her note said she had received a phone call from *The Montel Williams Show*, requesting that she attach a note to my door to get me to respond to them.

In the 21st century we've become woefully accustomed to our new beyond-Iron-Curtain-level surveillance state, but in the late 1990s Americans were less overtly spied upon. There wasn't even Google Maps, let alone Total Information Awareness or whatever horse-apple euphemism bureaucrats are currently using for their creepy universal snooping apparatus. I don't know how the Montel Williams people managed to find a neighbor to freak me out with a note. Maybe I'm wrong about psychics and Montel had Sylvia Browne locate my ethereal body or some crap. However they did it, it not only chilled me to the bone, it pissed me off.

I decided it might be a worthwhile pursuit to direct a hoax Montel's way. I sent the following message to the members of our P3 discussion group:

> perhaps some sterling individual on this list would be interested in appearing on montel wlliams in the role of "GODFREY DANIELS/ CALLS ISOLATED PHONE BOOTH" (or some equally blase onscreen graphic).

It was no surprise that the first to volunteer to be "me" was Dr. Cliff, Evil Dentist Give 'em hell, secret weapon! I gave Cliff the Montel Williams

contact information and they emailed him - sorry, "Godfrey"- to say they were "very excited about doing a spectacular segment on this phenomenon." An exited Dr. Cliff wrote to P3, "looks like a trip to nyc? i think i'll demand an afro wig or something for the show. wonder what kind of digs they put you up in? or, maybe someone is just blowing smoke up *godfrey's* ass again. we'll see."

They soon became suspicious of Dr. Cliff (as anyone might and probably everyone should). They demanded he provide identification. Cliff's fallback plan was the same one my friends often resorted to when answering calls at the Booth: namely, the claim that everyone took turns being me. This only raised further questions, as Cliff explained to P3:

> the producer, robin, is, 'like, totally serious about having you an the show!' and she'll call tomorrow to finalize plans. they seem to be obsessing on the *multiple godfreys* more than expected.
> [begin incessant question loop]
> 'so there's no actual godfrey?'
> 'how many godfreys are there?'
> 'and you're a dentist? are the other godfreys dentists?'

In all honesty, one of the best things I got out of the entire Mojave Phone Booth experience is that gloriously absurd sentence: *are the other godfreys dentists*? Cliff emailed me with further details.

> montel's folks are WAY into it. so i hafta decide if it's worth canceling my patients for. i'll probably go. they also need someone to drive to the booth to answer the phone. i told them i was sure i could get someone out there. YOU wanna do it? how funny would that be? *godfrey* is sitting in nyc blathering about the phone booth - hey! let's call and see who answers, i'm sure that SOMEONE will be there... and you answer it.

Unfortunately, I couldn't go because I had to work, but that point quickly became moot, anyhow, because the Montel people jerked Cliff around beyond Cliff's capacity to endure being jerked around.

> i told her in no uncertain terms she could fuck herself, and that her planning skills were pathetic, and that i couldn't rationalize taking unpaid leave to come to nyc and provide free entertainment from which her company would profit.
> fuck montel williams and everything he stands for.
> fuck montel williams and everything he stands for.
> fuck montel williams and everything he stands for.
> am i clear on this? i can explain at greater length if need be.

Boothquake!

Shortly after one o'clock in the morning on October 16, 1999, I climbed into bed, but no sooner had I settled in and lay still than the bed began shaking violently, as though someone were in the room with me , and taken hold of one of he bedposts, jerking it from side to side. It was an eerie feeling. It felt

how I imagine that certain type of waking sleep paralysis feels that convinces people they've been visited by space aliens or succubi or whatever one's cultural equivalent for that happens to be.

It took only a few seconds to realize that what I was feeling was an earthquake. Finally! I'd always wanted to experience an earthquake. I'd been in two in Califonua without managing to notice, though people in the same building with did, and I'd always been disappointed about that. I wanted to know what walking in an earthquake felt like but was afraid it'd end while I was getting out of bed and that I'd kind of miss the full effect of it. So I stayed put for the duration of the quake, a period that felt like maybe 20-30 seconds.

It was a damage-free and enjoyable event, made even better when I awoke to find out that the quake had originated many hundreds of miles away from my Sonoran Desert home with its epicenter in the Mojave Desert, only about 150 miles from the Booth.

Was this a Sign of the Boothocalypse? Was it a sign that the Booth hubbub would quell itself? Maybe the Booth's version of the Biblical quake that rent the temple veil in two? Had the quake rent the Booth in two? As a Wagnerian, I'd have regarded an earthquake as a more than satisfactory ersatz *Götterdämmerung* for the Booth.

I wasn't the only person in the world for whom reports of a Mojave earthquake first brought to mind thoughts not of people or buildings but a telephone booth. Emails regarding the quake had already begun arriving in the Deuce of Clubs mailbox during the night as I slept. According to someone called "turtleworld," no one was at the Booth at the time of the quake.

> After I first found out the earthquake was centered in the desert, my very first impulse (this being 3:00 in the morning) was to call the phone booth and make sure it was alright. I had called a few hours before the earthquake and no one picked up, so I already knew no one was out there. I have a question. Do you find this impulse healthy? I'm acting like it's a child of mine. Please tell me I'm alright.

I told him I was sure he was perfectly healthy but that he should probably consider the source. Another emailer, Steve, supplied some details:

> It is a relief to know that the phone booth was not a victim. That morning, as I turned on the news, I was shaken to hear the Cal Tech people misname the quake as the "Hector Mine Quake." Anyone should be able to tell that it should be called the "Mojave Phone Booth Quake." I tried to call Cal Tech and explain their error but a secretary said that they were all busy and took my name and said someone would call me when they could.

I wished I had been at the Booth when the quake hit. I also wished - just a little bit - that the quake would have put the Booth out of commission. Not permanently, of course. Just for maybe a few months. But the many newspaper articles worldwide assuring everyone that the Booth had survived the earthquake intact showed that it was far too late for such an easy *Götterdämmerung*. To paraphrase Adam West's Batman, "Some days, you just can't get rid of a Booth."

Booth Vandalism

There was an effort to get rid of the Booth, though it might have been the work of a non-governmental entity. Shortly after the earthquake, the Booth's phone was put out of commission not by an earthquake or any other force of nature, unless you count humans as a force of nature (as one should, philosophically speaking).

From: Paula A.

While searching the net for a picture of a phone booth, I came across your web site. I laughed until I peed, then called the booth.

It was answered by a 50-year-old man named Richard from San Jose. This Richard is somewhat of a hero - along with a 60-something fellow named Charlie. When Richard arrived at the booth yesterday. Charlie (who frequently drives to the booth to answer it) was lamenting the fact that someone had cut the wire. So the two men tore the thing apart and got it working again.

"All is now right with the world," he said. "And thanks to this phone booth, the world is becoming a smaller place."

Charlie Wilcox: A lot of times people'd go out there and the phone would be broke down, so I'd go back to the house and get some tape and wire cutters and go back out and get it going again. Somebody'd gone out and cut the wire, but they didn't cut it clear in two. I touched the wire and got a dial tone. Put it all back together. Then they cut it right at the box where it come in, and I had to tear that all apart. The woman that took the repair on it, she come out several times and put it back together for us.

Doc: You saw Pac-Bell people when they came out to repair the phone?

Charlie: Just that one woman. I'd talk to her. She didn't care. It was just a job for her.

From: turleworld

Subject: stupid people

All the people who send you emails saying that the phone is off the hook because it was busy when they called need to be put in the idiot mailbag. Are these people just that dumb to think that they are the only ones calling? Do they think the phone has call waiting?

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I wonder if anyone has actually gone on a "hang up the phone" pilgrimage, only to find the phone on the hook ringing away. I hope you notify these people as to how dumb they are.

Whoever was repeatedly sabotaging the Booth might have been not so bright either. A smart saboteur would have done to the Booth's wires what Apaches used to do to telegraph wires. cutting them at a pole top and tying them back up. That way the connection would be broken yet it wouldn't be visually obvious as to where it was broken. Sometimes it would take days or weeks to find the break and repair the line.

Only a few days later, further vandalism befell the Booth.

My friend and I visited the Mojave Phone Booth today. We got stuck in the sand. but Charlie Wilcox came to our rescue. He took us through his property to the phone booth, only to find that

some jerk had ripped out the phone.

In about 3 weeks we plan to go back and spend a night there. Charlie said be would let us know when the booth had been repaired.

A Booth fan from Finland wrote, "Now today I found in your pages, that somebody have stolen the phone of the booth. I can't understand why. It's worth of nothing for thieves but worth everything for all the world." In a later email he wrote: "Anyway, that phone booth idea is really good, to make a lonely phone booth in the middle of the desert famous around the world. I hope you will get more same kind of ideas in future, things like that are salt and spice of our every days food, hope you know what I mean."

I certainly did, and do.

It was fun to get different views of the same story, which often happened once the Booth's popularity exploded, even when it happened to be a vandalism story.

From: Bill & Louise
Date: Sat, 30 Oct 1999
We got to the phone booth around 5PM when we saw the receiver had been ripped out So we put a rock where the receiver goes so the phone can ring once again, which it did non stop after that. It's a shame this had to happen, we were looking forward to answering the call of the wild.

From:Jess
Date: October 30, 1999
I finally talked a friend into driving to the phone booth today and was very disappointed to find that some idiot has tore it up. there was a rock cradled in the receiver and the phone was ringing like crazy. how cool is that

Professor Cardyhouse and Andrea suggested we keep checking to see whether the Booth's phone receiver got listed on eBay. It could be coincidental that the vandalism seemed to begin right after the crush of Los Angeles-area attention from the article by the "I promise I'll be cool" guy. Considering subsequent events, it could just as easily have been NPS employees doing it. This was Lorene's suspicion, as her daughter Robin told me via email.

I just talked to my mom last night and she told me that the only thing missing from the phone booth was the receiver, that someone had cut off the receiver, the rest of the phone is still there.

She said who she suspects did it is the National Park Service. The reason she suspects this is because every time they come out there they take off everything that is on or around the phone booth and that they are annoyed by the whole phone booth thing (poor them).

The NPS was claiming, and would continue to claim, that residents in the area were angry about it. According to every area resident I ever spoke with, that was a lie. There was only one guy who was upset, and I could understand why, as Lorene explained via Robin.

I also asked her [Lorene] how all this is affecting those who live there. She said everyone really enjoys it, that the only person who is not thrilled is one rancher and the reason he is not is that people are always driving through his property to get to the phone booth. He lives on Valley View Ranch Rd. so if people were to take another route to the phone booth he wouldn't mind it

either. My mom also said most everyone who does come visit is conscientious about not littering.

What Robin said was seconded by an email from Rob and Jan.

> The road literally passes directly between their house and some out-buildings. The porch of their house is not more than a few feet from the road. Even driving slow kicks up a great deal of dust on this road; I can't imagine how unpleasant it must be to be sitting at that house when someone comes barreling along.
>
> As a longtime Mojave Desert nut, I've found this whole MPB craze amusing, but I am concerned that people, in droves, will attempt to see the Booth in person. There are a lot of inexperienced drivers entering the desert these days. A woman at the Forest Service told me a story of an elderly couple getting stuck in the sand trying to make the trip in an old Thunderbird. Another couple traveling with young children had their car break down. They had no water or other provisions. Not smart.
>
> But judging by the condition of the booth, and the lack of trash near the booth, most people are treating the desert with the respect it deserves.

Robin added, "While nothing has been said on our end about the traffic at the booth I can appreciate the concern. It's a good idea to ask folks to call instead of driving out there or if they do drive out to limit the number of cars they take out there if they have a group of people traveling together."

Lorene's brother, Bob Ray, didn't agree with the rancher theory ("fantastic guy ... I don't think he would have done it, because they needed the Booth out there") but Lorene and Terry thought otherwise.

Terry Caffee: I know he [the rancher) was taking a lot of that stuff [from the Booth].
Lorene Caffee: That doesn't surprise me. [His) biggest thing was, you know, he had a young boy there and people driving through his yard and I can understand that.
Doc: So can I. I felt bad about that. At that point I was telling people they might not want to go out to the Booth.
Lorene: We just told them to go around.
Doc: But if they didn't have four-wheel-drive -
Terry: They'd get lost. There arc three ways you can take out of there. You get on that one going south and get in that sand and you're dead.

(You might recall that the southward trail was the one along which I mindlessly led Ponyboy and Daniel on my second visit to the Booth.)

Doc: So the rancher wasn't annoyed at you for being involved in the Booth hubbub?
Charlie: He just didn't think it was right because it was supposed to be a phone booth, and that's what it's supposed to have been used for.
Doc: That's a very Platonic way of thinking. "This is a phone booth." What's a phone booth for? Phone calls. There you go.

The Las Vegas *Review-Journal* reported that "Pacific Bell spokesman Seve Getzug said it isn't quite as dire as it sounds. The phone is still there,

only the handset is gone. The company is sending out a crew today to repair not only the device but the worldwide void the temporary outage caused."

From: Martin
Date: Mon, 1 Nov 1999
Well i almost can't believe it! my call to the mojave phone was answered just some 5 minutes ago! the lady answered the call with "mojave phone" and told me that she was a technician and she was repairing the handset because someone has stolen it.

From: js
Date: Tue, 2 Nov 1999
The LA Times reported today that the phone has been repaired.

Apart from all other considerations, it was kind of amusing that the Booth had become so well known that major newspapers worldwide found themselves reporting on any change in its status.

Networking

CBS, NBC, ABC / CBS. NBC, ABC / CBS, NBC, ABC
- Larry Norman. I Am the Six o'Clock News"

Waves of media requests continued. CBS and ABC had already done Booth stories but an NBC *Nightly News* producer named Bruce really wanted to get me on camera. That wasn't going to happen but because he seemed different from many of the other major media people I had talked to (I know, I know), I vouched for him to Andrea, if she were willing to appear on camera. She was. Andrea and I were both won over by NBC but partly for a technological reason.

Nowadays consumer versions of flying drones are available to all. I had wanted aerial photos of the Booth but hadn't had any luck with camera rockets, the only method available to me in the 1990s. Bruce told us that NBC would bring out a helicopter.

Andrea said Bruce liked me and was perfectly willing to video record me wearing a bandanna. "Are you sure you don't want to do this?"

I was sure.

Andrea kept me updated throughout the process.

The NBC piece, on the other hand, might actually be cool ... (I know, I know, anything can happen.) But Bruce kept emphasizing that he knew we'd had an icky experience with the San Fran guy and that HIS outfit was nothing like that. He was almost snotty about them being a "local" crew and that I had to remember that this was NBC NIGHTLY NEWS, dammit!

Once out at the Booth, NBC tried to get someone, anyone, to come out to be on camera.

From: SunnyFox
I called 4 times today and got 3 different NBC newsguys - one of them was a helicopter

photographer named Alex, one was Roger O'Neill, the reporter from the NBC Nightly News, and the last one tonight was a guy who asked, since I had visited your website and called 3 times already, if I could appear nationally on the air tomorrow for their piece on the MPB.

I announced the upcoming NBC segment to my friends via our P3 list.

the mojave phone booth will be featured tonight on the nbc nightly news with tom brokaw (barring, the reporter says, any breaking news story, such as a politician being caught red-handed at something or other - which would never" happen in this country, i assured him).

the booth's rather over-exposed these days, media-wise, i know. but i wanted to mention this report because they have succeeded where we ourselves have failed: they have aerial photos of the booth and the word "PHONE" and the phone number we spelled out in quartz.

and you don't want to miss the smirk tom brokaw is sure to have on his face after THIS story, do you?

Taking part in a major media piece caused Andrea to reflect on the Booth phenomenon in general.

I guess what I was projecting on you was a sense of, I don't know, baby leaving the nest, something queer like that. It's totally -yours-, always will be (whether you'll agree with that or not, I don't know, but I believe it), but it's grown so big. It no longer feels like it's -yours-.

It's become mine, it's become everyone's who has ever heard it ring in person.

And that's OK, it was inevitable. You found and celebrated a very cool thing, something that made people everywhere spend a few billable hours on your site. Some of them had something funny to talk about at dinner, others hopped into their can (or onto airplanes) to see for themselves.

Throughout the short period of its fame, I saw very few of the Booth reports that appeared on television but thanks to Andrea, I did see the NBC report. It was well done and included the promised helicopter footage of the Booth. (As anticipated, it did include a scripted Brokaw wisecrack at the end followed by his trademark smirk).

I liked it well enough that I asked Andrea to see whether NBC would give me a tape of it.

I called the NYC NBC producer the other day to give her my address so she could send a tape of the piece. I asked if she wouldn't mind sending you a copy a, well, and she laughed. "GODFREY? But he was so uncooperative!"

She was kidding around, but said that since you didn't actually - participate - (like you haven't done enougb already), she couldn't do it.

But then she offered to send me two, in case I wanted to forward one to you.

I thought that was very cool of the producer. I was impressed all around with the, I guess I'd have to call it *humanity*, of the NBC crew. Many people who emailed me after the report were annoyed that NBC didn't mention me by name. "We went upstairs to watch the TV," said Bon von Wheelie, whose zine had set all of this Booth hubbub in motion, "and I said, 'Oh boy, this will be great, 'cos we're going to see you on here talking.' And then all these people, we didn't know who they were, and they didn't mention you." I should have made it clear beforehand on the Booth website that I had specifically requested that NBC *not* mention me. I probably didn't because in nearly all cases when I tried that with reporters - even before the Booth phenomenon - that always turned out to be more or less a joke, with reporters making their promises and then betraying me. In fact, yet another reporter egregiously betrayed me the very same week as the NBC report. So I was pleasantly surprised by NBC's honoring their word. Not only that, but Bruce even called me after the segment aired to see what I thought of the job they'd done. Class act all around, was what I thought.

And we finally got to see the Mojave Phone Booth from the skies!

NOTES

1 "Who Was Tom Jeffords?" *The Journal of Arizona History* (Winter, 1982)

NICK'S SECRET

> She knew from the start that it was no going to be
> an "Isn't i wonderful? book and so she titled it
> *One Long Trail of Toilet Brushes*.
>
> - Bobbie Bouton and Nancy Marshall, *Home Games*

The process of putting together this book required a lot of interviews. Most people were happy to discuss the Booth, but Girl Trouble's Bon von Wheelie was at first not willing to chat on the record about the phenomenon in which she'd played so instrumental a part.

> I really don't know if my take on the phone booth would be good for your book. The phone hooch wasn't a positive experience for me. In fact it was a cautionary tale of how when you find something really cool, SHUT UP about it so it stays cool.
>
> Nick felt really bad about it. He felt he helped wreck the phone hooch spot by telling about it and I helped him by printing it in Wig Out. [...) I kinda doubt people would want to read that in your book.

I already knew that Nick felt bad about how the Booth saga had unfolded but, unbeknownst to Bon, it wasn't primarily for the reason he gave her. Bon may be the Girl Trouble member billed as The Grouchy One," but she wrote back later in the day to soften her refusal.

> You know Godfrey even though I'm not very positive about what happened to the phone booth when it got away from you, I forgot to thank you for being cool enough to want to talk to me about it in the first place. Lots of people would skip the origin and just take it from where they came in. So thanks.
>
> We really appreciate that you mentioned us on your website and sill have a link to us!Just thought I'd better clear that up so you won't think that we're bugged.

Bon quickly changed her mind after I emailed her a teaser of the bizarre twist you're about to read. "Okay, Godfrey, you piqued my interest," she said. "If the story doesn't necessarily have to be a 'feel good wow isn't it cool what happened' kind of thing, then I'm on board."

All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning.
- Albert Camus

A few days after the Booth quake, another quake shook the Booth world - well, my Booth world, that is. Deuce of Clubs reader Lisa M. emailed me that she had a Booth article from February 23, 1996.

Wait. What?

Yep. Nineteen ninety-six - that is, the year before I made the website about the Booth. More importantly, that was before Nick wrote Girl Trouble about the Booth. Lisa kindly agreed to send me the clipping, which arrived a few days later. The article, by Don Rogers - "Lonesome Phone has the ring of a desert landmark" - was from *The Orange County Register*.

Let's just say I found the article ... troubling.

From Nick' account in *Wig Out!*	**From the Rogers article:**
Recently, I spotted a small dot with the word telephone" beside it on a map of the Mojave desert...	A while back, I'd noticed a very small dot on the American Automobile Association map for San Bernardino County, with the word "telephone" beside it.
Intrigued, I donned a cheap, brown scrape and a pair of wing-tips and headed out to find it in my old jeep. After many hours I do find it [...]	Curiosity got the best of me, and I wanted to find it. My trip turned into a real expedition down dusty desert road and into phone-company history.
(the glass is shot out and the phone book is missing) but it works!	Although the glass was shot out, the phone book's gone and the frame riddled with bullet holes, the phone works.
A nearby rancher told me that in he 70s they replaced the old rotary style phone with push buttons	[Quoting a resident] "It used to be a rotary-dial phone. The phone company changed it to push-

because the sheep were having trouble dialing.	buttons a while back, when they found that the cows couldn't get their hoofs into the dial when they made calls.
Apparently, this booth was put in after WWII [...]	The original pole line and wires were put there in 1942, as part of the war-mobilization effort.
for the use of a nearby mine which ceased operations in the 60s [...]	The phone was originally put there for the truck drivers who went to the mine. Seems the drivers didn't like walking back to the highway through the Mojave desert when their trucks broke down.
Oh, if you're interested, the number is (619) 733-9969. Let it ring a long time if you want a response.	In case you're interested, the number is (619) 733-9969. Expect to wait a while before someone answers.

If this were a movie, this is where I'd be shown frantically scooting my chair among various tables piled with papers, reference books, and computer monitors. Obviously, something had been perpetrated here and wool had been pulled over eyes, but *why*? Who would lie about a *phone booth*? Was this how the Booth saga *really* started?

Nick's story had never changed. He'd even added his Booth origin story to his (now defunct) personal website:

> A few years ago I was browsing an auto club map and saw a cryptic notation of telephone with a small dot beside it in the middle of nowhere in the Mojave high desert. Intrigued, I set out to find it and did. I told some friends about it, word spread, and one Godfrey Daniels made the Mojo Phone Booth his personal obsession, now of international interest. Follow the story from the link above. If you find life a bit boring and dreary, need a lift and a smile, follow Godfrey in his quest for ... what neither of us has yet figured out. But, I think our parents would call this good, clean, fun.

I failed to find a way to contact Don Rogers, but I put together a web page at Deuce of Clubs with a table comparing the two accounts, as reproduced above. I did not make the page public or link to it from any of the Booth site pages. It wasn't my intention to shame or embarrass Nick but only to find out how all this had come about. I therefore forwarded the URL only to Nick.

Throughout my few contacts with him, Nick had come across as a somewhat elusive character. It seemed likely that he had for some reason plagiarized the Rogers story, but I wasn't 100% certain. I threw in other information and a request for a favor in an attempt to make my email feel a

little diffuse and as non-accusatory as possible. I wanted to give Nick the benefit of the doubt as well as the opportunity to stick to his story, if that's what he really wanted to do.

Date: 27oct1999
Subject: mojave phone disappears
hey, nick!

yep, it's true. i thought you'd want to know ... someone ripped the phone out of the booth. i'm inclined to think that it's one of the area ranchers, tired of vehicles trooping through his pasture to get to the booth.

i've been meaning to ask: do you have any photos of your trip to the booth that i could put up on the site? i find it interesting when people send me photos ... just watching the general deterioration in its appearance. people have sent me some *old* photos of the booth, when it still had glass & still said "telephone" on it.

[Here I included the DeuceOfClubs.com URL of the comparison table.]

looks like some reporter had a copy of_wig out!_in hand, doesn't it? do you know this rogers guy? i'm gonna try to contact him & see what he says. good plug for girl trouble, anyhow.

I heard back. from Nick the following day.

>i've been meaning to ask: do yon have any photos of your trip

I've got some kodachrome 64's of it but you won't want them after the following.

> do you know this rogers guy?

No, but I am familiar with a newspaper article he wrote about finding the Mojave phone booth which I took to be my "own" story for any number of stupid reasons. It was never intended to go beyond a small number of people. certainly not for publication anywhere, but that's another story. I had any number of times to fess up - to the lie but sometimes that's easier said than done, especially when the mojo phone booth phenomenon had snowballed to international interest mostly without my being aware of it When the roller coaster hits that first turn about all you can do is hang on. I am very sorry to have deceived you, my friends, and everyone who has followed be mojo booth story. I know you're going to have a field day with this one and I don't blame you. A lesson learned is that "a lie can run around the world before the truth ever thinks about pulling its boots on." Take care of the booth.

Greg the Bunny: Honest, I never meant to. but the whole thing just rolled out of control and it got bigger, and bigger. and bigger! It was like a giant snowball! Hey! You wanna hear my snowball song?

Junction Jack: No.

Nick's lie had by now run around the world thousands of times. I thought about the things he must have been feeling as the Booth story had first begun to spread. I didn't want to make him feel worse, but I'm sure you can understand that I had to know more. I wrote Nick back.

"Would you be willing to tell me more - anonymously - about how this all came about? I mean, I'm kind of invested in the story."

Embarrassed though he obviously was, Nick graciously agreed to tell me

the story behind his subterfuge.

Yeah, I guess I owe you the details.

At the time the article came out I was getting ready to take a death valley trip and decided to find the booth instead from Rogers' article. A good excuse to be juking around out in the desert. I was then the webmaster for a non-profit organization and wanted to jazz up the staff and directors page with more than a name and title for each person, so I had asked each to write a short bio on themselves and only received one lukewarm bio. I asked again and was told by one staff member that writing about oneself was not an easy thing to do.

Nonsense, I replied, name, education, pets, hobbies, and some personal experiences or achievements etc. Wasn't hard and proceeded to write a sample bio to show what I was looking for and added the booth part just because it was so fresh in my mind. Again, no response from anyone so I just dropped the idea realizing that it was indeed difficult, so much, that I had resorted to using someone else's experiences in the bio sample.

Now Bon von Wheelie is one of the directors of this organization and two of the Girl Trouble band members are on the staff, which is how she got ahold of this. I did my booth trip and had a great time.

One day months later, I get a copy of Wig Out! in the mail and toss it into a pile for later reading. Later on, many months down the road, I get some e-mail from Bon and the guys telling me I should check out your site. I log in, look around, had some laughs, really enjoyed the piece on your running for office, but never read the pointless exercise in telephony. Didn't sound interesting to me and I had no idea I was a part of it. Later, I get some mail from one of the guys in girl trouble saying, "boy you sure started something with that phone booth thing, have you checked out Godfrey's site lately?"

Uh Oh.

Up to this point I had no idea that Bon had used a part of that sample bio as a letter to the editor in Wig Out! without my knowledge or consent. To be brutally honest, if she had asked, I probably would have said OK since the lie had already been perpetuated and who reads Wig Out! anyway?

By then, the mojo booth thing was snowballing rapidly and I contacted you, pretty much to feel you out as to fessing up. I fretted and procrastinated. When the NY Times piece came out and I saw they were not interested in me I decided to just keep quiet about it all and hope the booth thing would run its course and die down.

So, that's it in a nutshell. You mentioned that the details of this would be fascinating and a week ago I would have disagreed. Today, re-thinking all the events of this, I would have to reconsider. I've had choices and made them, mostly badly, propelling people and events outside my control or ken based on them. If I wasn't so intimately involved I would think of it as an interesting study of the ongoing human comedy.

- Nick

An interesting study of the ongoing human comedy. I'm not sure I could do a better job of summarizing the saga of the Booth. How odd and fascinating it was for me to find out that, long before the Booth story spun out of my control, it had spun out of Nick's.

"For any number of stupid reasons," to borrow Nick's phrase, as years passed I'd never gotten around to mentioning to Bon that Nick had purloined the Booth story from someone else, until her reluctance to talk on the record about the Booth years later for this book. (So, thanks, Nick, for changing Bon's mind.)

Doc: Even things like the part where he jokes about animals dialing - that was from the article.
Bon: Wow. You know what, that sounds exactly like something he'd say, "if you want to call the sheep" or whatever. That was totally like him. We had no

reason to doubt it. But the thing that's so weird is that I think probably Nick's thinking was, *Who the hell's gonna read it?* I mean, *Wig Out!*? Come on. I produced 500 of them and passed out 400 or something. It was such a short run. Nobody thought there'd be a YOU in the equation that would go out there and try that thing!

Doc: Whoops.

Bon: When I asked him to use it, I'm sure he went, "*Wig Out!*? Yeah. Surrre. Fine. I don't care." I'm sure he thought more people would have seen it on the Internet with his bio than would have seen it in that stupid little magazine. And you know what? I did ask him. I would've never put it in there if I hadn't asked him. And the people who weren't doing their bios was me and Kurt and Dale [from Girl Trouble]! See, the Luthiers Guild - that's my sister and brother-in-law. It's all a family thing, and that's how we knew [Nick], from him being a luthier and stuff. I had space I needed to fill for *Wig Out!* It'd been a while and I didn't have any good letters and - you know how you do, you just think, *Where can I get some letters?* I'd read this thing and we all went, Wow, this is so awesome, what a deal! So I emailed him, or had Tim email him, and Nick says, Yeah, that's cool. But if he had have said, No, boy, I wouldn't have put it in there. There's just no way.

Nick and I exchanged emails again after he had told me the whole story. I told him that I had disguised his identity when relating the tale on DeuceOfClubs.com and I thanked him because the fact remained that I didn't read about the Booth in a newspaper, I read it in *Wig Out!*

From: Nick Von Robison

Thanks for shielding me from embarrassment and I think you're right that no matter how it came about, the whole phone booth thing has caught the world's attention simply because it is good, clean fun and not another drive by shooting, disgruntled postal worker, etc. thing in the news. I think you should try and contact this Rogers guy. I'm amazed that a journalist who put so much into an article has not twigged to what he started.

No doubt he'll be pissed at me but maybe realize that he wrote a song and if some peasant in a dugout canoe in Tierra del Fuego is whistling his tune, take it as a compliment and rcalize that his melody has the power to reach all the world in whatever way.

- Nick

Bon said, "Just goes to show you, better always tell the truth!" I guess all those moms out there were right after all.

There was a further odd thing about that Rogers article. The Orange County newspaper had only reprinted it. Originally it had appeared in *Out West: The Newspaper That Roams*. Remember zines, from way back in the first chapter? And *Factsheet Five*, the zine directory I mentioned? Here's part of *Factsheet Five's* mini-review of that *Out West* issue:

A thick newspaper about the bizarre and wonderful west. Half Route 66 Americana, half curiosity

museum, but all fun and adventure. It's amazing how full the west is of quirky lore and oddities. **Don Rogers tells us about his quest for "The Lonesome Phone" in the California desert. And there it was, fifteen miles from the nearest paved road, scarred with bullet holes, but still working.**" [Emphasis added]

For many years I read damned near every word of every issue of *Factheet Five*. Not only that, but I had been an *Out West* subscriber, as well! By 1995, however, I'd gone over completely to the Internet and had regrettably let my *F5* and *Out West* subscriptions lapse.

The obvious question that occurred to me was, *If I had read the Rogers article about the Booth in* Out West, *would I have been as intrigued*?

Impossible to say, I suppose. Context is a funny thing. But I have to suspect that I would not have been as intrigued, and almost certainly not enough to have constructed a personal project based around it because it had already been the subject of a print article, which to my way of thinking would have made any project I formulated around it derivative and therefore somehow no longer personal.

I do still wonder about it sometimes, though.

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

> But then it bcame something else, something a bit special. It became an object of cult veneration. Or, to put it another way, of internet generated fetishism - which places it in the same improbable category as the formerly obscure bachelor from Izmir, Turkey, called Mahir Cagri, whose Web site has witnessed well over a million hits in the last month. The World Wide Web has made unlikely stars of them both. But while Mahir's fairly ordinary vanity website has spawned an online fan club and, inevitably, Mahir T-shirts, the Mojave phone box may prove to be the more enduring cult.
>
> - Andrew Gumbel, *The Independent* (London)

Indeed, the Mojave Phone Booth and its cult might well have endured for a good, long time. While the Booth phenomenon was going on, Pacific Bell seemed to be fine with the Booth's fame and even willing to take advantage of it. The fact that Pac Bell had sent out a crew to replace not the Booth's shattered main glass panes but instead the glass "Pacific Bell" panes on the Booth suggested that the company viewed the Booth's notoriety as a public relations opportunity.

As of August of 1999, according to the *San Bernardino County Sun*, "Pacific Bell spokesman Brian Brokowski didn't know the booth's exact chronological history, but said that. as wireless technology has improved, the telephone has become a less-than-profitable unit 'It's not making a lot of money, but it's never been put up for review or removal,' he said. 'It's never been a problem, so there's never been any need to review it.' Good thing. If

Pacific Bell ever were to yank the booth from the spot, the public outcry might be loud enough to be heard in Barstow."

Even better information came from a correspondent working at Pac-Bell, who told me that the Booth's record in the phone company's computer system included a HUGE call log along with "a note from a High Level manager stating, '9/24/99 DON'T EVER DISCONNECT THIS PHONE "

Not all the news was encouraging. I'd recently heard some bad news from a Mojave visitor concerning another phone booth in the NPS's new domain, the one at the Kelso train depot.

> Greetings, I was out at the "booth" on 11-7-99 everything was okay. From there I went to be Kelso Depot. The phone booth at the Depot had a notice from the phone company stating that due to inactivity it will be removed 12-99.

I asked my Pac-Bell source whether the phone company's system had any notes on the booth at Kelso. She found nothing but only because it timed out she had accidentally searched *Keslo* instead of *Kelso*.

Ominously, the Kelso phone was indeed removed in December, leaving behind only its empty wooden booth. If the phone at Kelso Depot, which is right on a main, paved road through the Mojave, was considered inactive, that did not seem to bode well for an isolated Booth far off the beaten path.

Meanwhile, there were conflicting signals regarding the attitude of NPS bureaucrats toward the Booth. A documentary filmmaker wrote me in March of 2000 to warn about NPS intentions.

> One NPS employee was there when we arrived but left before I could interview him. I did, however, have a long talk with Lorene about the park closing down the mine. She assures me that the phone booth has been the topic of Park Service meetings in the context of "What can we do about the phone booth? How can we get rid of it?"
>
> They have stripped the booth of the offerings and the beautiful routed sign someone made. You have to understand the Park mentality. They believe that people are bad for parks and they do everything in their power to discourage visitation that they don't control. I've worked around park pukes for 20 years and understand them better than most.

Internet pioneer Edson Hendricks, one of the pirate radio broadcasters, seemed to confirm this report a few weeks later.

> I had a pretty interesting conversation with an off-duty US Park Service person in the motel office in Baker. I hate to leave you hanging, but it was a long one covering a lot of ground, and I am just not up to recounting it all right now. But I will say that she left me with the clear impression that the fed 'crats are evidently ignoring their own rules and procedures in this case. There's a shock, eh?

Shannon McKinnon, of Canada's *National Post*, wrote me that Edson had told her the same thing.

> I just spoke with one of the guys who did the short-wave radio broadcast out there with us (very cool people)1 and he told me that he ran into one of the park ranger, on the weekend & she told him that the booth was attracting such attention that they might get some money to fix up the road and PUT IN SERVICES! Is this your worst nightmare?

That pretty well summed up my *second*-worst nightmare, yet at that point it was sounding pretty good in comparison to my worst nightmare, which was that the NPS would rip out the Booth and cart it away, never to be seen again.

Edson soon provided the details of his story.

> Date: Wed, 29 Mar 2000
>
> A lady I know to be a US Park Service employee in Baker told me, much to my surprise, that the Park Service would really like to keep that phone booth right where it is! The reason, she explained, is that they need attendance to their park to get money and support, and as things stand right now, that phone booth is about their biggest attraction! I AM NOT making this up. She said they hoped people coming to the park to see the phone booth might then notice the other attractions there, and thus build general interest in the Mojave National Preserve.
>
> She told me quite seriously that the Park Service was researching all the history of the phone booth, in an effort to determine whether it should stay. But she made it very clear that they do want to keep it. If they keep it, the road access into there will be improved for regular road vehicles, rest rooms will be installed, and some other site improvements will also be added.
>
> I quizzed her on the mine operations. She seemed unfamiliar with Lorene's name, but she was vaguely familiar with the situation. She explained to me that commercial operations actively ongoing at the time the management of the area went from he BLM to the Park Service were entitled to proceed as before, but no expansion would be allowed. Dormant operations, such as Charlie's mine, could not be reopened. So I don't understand why they seem to be determined to shut down Lorene's operation.

That the NPS might be floating plans for "fixing" or "fixing up" the area around the Booth was surprising, but not overwhelmingly so. It made quite a bit of sense from their stance, or at least their public stance, given that - according to official NPS literature, anyway - the NPS was trying to get more people to visit their newly acquired jewel. Then again, sense and bureaucrats are often at opposite poles, so it was no surprise to hear that the NPS was scheming to find a way to get rid of the Booth. Another thing to consider is that the stated goals of an organization often stand in opposition to the personal goals of the leaders of that organization. That's especially true of a government bureaucracy.

Accordingly, the following month, more overtly unpropitious information came into my possession.

An Ominous Warning Central

> Central, central I've been telephonin' the blues,
> Central, central, please give me good news;
> I've been phonin', phonin',
> I been telephoning all night long,
> Bet you fifty to one hundred,
> something is goin' on wrong.
>
> - Vora Spivey, Telephoning the Blues" (1929)

On April 17, 2000, I received an odd and unsettling piece of mail. It was an envelope bearing a San Bernardino postmark but no return address. Inside was an unsigned letter - a warning. It purported to contain information from

inside the National Park Service regarding their plan for the isolated telephone booth that had come to be known worldwide as The Mojave Phone Booth.

> The Mojave Desert Phone Booth is about to be removed by the National Park Service. Park managers believe the booth is not compatible with the purpose of a national park. The Park Service has arranged with Bell Telephone to proceed with the removal in the following fashion to make it look like this is Ma Bells idea and get the NPS off the hook.
>
> Some time in the next few weeks -
>
> Service to the booth will be cut off for a short period of time just like when the receiver was ripped off.
>
> Then a Ma Bell crew will come out, disconnect the booth, remove it ad all traces of its existence from the Mojave National Park.
>
> Eventually the entire phone line cross the park will be removed.
>
> The fact that this phone draws dozens of calls per day from around the world and is visited by hundreds of people every year is irrelevant to park managers. Internet sites, phone calls, and even national-international news and film crews - phooey - these people don't have a life.
>
> E-mail contacts @nps.gov are superintendent mary_martin, regional director john_reynolds, and even the local U. S. Congressman for the California area Ralph Lewis. Ma Bell they are more or less pawns even though the line must generate a bit of revenue what with calla from europe, asia, and continental U.S.
>
> Park phone is 760-255-8801 Fax 760-255-8809
> Lewis - 909-862-6030

Some to whom I showed the letter weren't so worried. "Obviously a hoax," said Krishna.

It did not strike me as a hoax at all. On the contrary, everything about it strongly inclined me to believe it was genuine. I became even more afraid for the poor Booth out there, standing alone against an empire.

Shannon McKinnon emailed me to weigh in:

> I hope the letter you got IS a hoax. I don't want to see the booth removed - it would devastate Charlie. But I can't say that I would like to see it become a tourist trap either, although I feel like a culture-snob by saying that especially since I've already enjoyed the experience in a relatively secluded way. Also ... a bit of tourism wouldn't exactly hurt the area. Lots to think about, but no one is in quite the same position as you - which is interesting
>
> I'm not arguing that crowds won't destroy the experience, but I'm not sure how I feel about it being removed entirely. Tourism is an organic process, and I don't feel the need or the right to save them from themselves. Does that sound horrible? Not only will a crowd not bother them, they would probably covet the experience even more because of it.
>
> They turn experiences into cultural wastelands, but unless they can be taught to create for themselves aren't they really just being deprived of a little joy?
>
> It's easy for me to argue this POV because the MPB wasn't my idea - it was annexed from you, so I feel like a bit of a tourist myself.

In May of 1999, the Booth did go out of order for a few weeks. Some attributed the outage to a fire that was said to be burning at that time somewhere in Joshua Tree. I didn't know whether that was the case. I hoped it

was. What I did know was that the anonymous letter had predicted a planned outage beforehand. Had this been a dry run to test reaction? If so, they got reaction, all right. Pacific Bell received phone calls from all over the world, reporting the problem and wanting to know when the Booth's phone would be working again. I wondered whether the Booth's phone had been replaced, as had been happening across the country, with one of the newer models that allows only outgoing calls, not incoming ones. The reason given for that was, "Because drugs," ostensibly because drug dealers were using pagers and payphones to conduct business. That excuse didn't figure to fly very well in a remote desert.

By the 11th of June, the Booth's phone was once again operating normally.

There was at that time a nutty book called 5/5/2000 that was predicting an ice-age style disaster because of a planetary (semi-)alignment occurring on that date. Miraculously, both Earth and Booth managed to weather May 5 without incident.

On May 13, 2000, I heard from California artist Laura Molina about her first visit to the Booth. "It was an amazing experience," she wrote. I began to hope that maybe, contra the Biblical epistle, all things really would continue as they were from the beginning.

NOTES

1 Shannon recounted part of a conversation she'd had with Edson

while at the Booth:

E: You know all that talk about how nobody knew the internet was going to become so large and out of control? Remember back when it was just starting?

S: Uh...I was pretty young, but ... yeah.

E: Well, they lied. It was unleashed (!!) in a deliberate, systematic way.

S: Really.

E: Yes. IT WAS UNLEASHED BY ME!

(If you think he's kidding, look up Edson Hendricks on Wikipedia sometime.)

THE END OF THE BOOTH

> Desert folks ... who have put in decades of hardship, pioneering an area, tend to resent harassment from government officials and all such critters who years later show up with white shins and lily-soft hands to set rules about what can and cannot be done on their property.
>
> - Bob Ausmus. *East Mojave Diary*

Only a few days later, I received a brief email from Lorene's nephew, Tony. This was all it said:

> Date: Wed, 17 May 2000
> The NPS removed the booth yesterday
> :(

Disbelief and Doubt

> Lonely little carpet tuft
> A twisted woolly Joshua tree
> Surrounded by is fallen friends
> Alone in a threadbare woven field
> Lone standing tuft - defy be foot
>
> - The Soronprfbs

> What the pbone booth?!?
>
> - Beastie Boys

Even though I had long expected this piece of bad news, it was still tough to believe and even tougher to take. The mysterious warning letter had been for real and now the Mojave Phone Booth was gone. The Colosseum in Rome couldn't have contained the number of monkey balls that sucked.

I'm glad no one was there to see my face as I read the news of the Booth's destruction. I probably wore the expression of a man who's just received news of a social disease, or an intestinal parasite, or a property tax hike. I like to tell people I have only one feeling but that science has not yet identified it. Whatever my one feeling is, this was a direct strike on it. It felt like an ice cream headache in my heart.

It never does me any good to throw a duck fit when I have to endure the latest injustice of some government employee or other, but I sometimes throw one anyway. I'm sure I did that day. A tide of Booth memories rose in my head. The morning of that first Booth phone conversation with Lorene I could never have guessed my Mojave Phone Booth Project would lead to the poor Booth's destruction.

I dialed the Booth's number, just (as I had at the Project's outset) what would happen. The line rang, as it always had. If Pac-Bell had removed the Booth, it seemed strange that they hadn't put a "This number has been disconnected or is no longer in service" message on the Booth's line. Or was it a phantom ring, intended to mislead callers worldwide into believing the Booth was still there, awaiting their calls?

There was nothing more I could do except post the news to Deuce of Clubs. Not knowing much, I couldn't say much, so all I said was, "Sad Announcement: The Mojave Phone Booth Has Been Removed."

Reaction began flooding in immediately.

Andrea: Yesterday I was talking to a friend about the trip I'm making to Utah in a few weeks. He asked why I was going there rather than back to the Mojave, back to the booth. I jokingly said that all other reasons aside, the booth would probably be gone by the time I returned. Ow.

Yuppieslayer: BREAKING NEWS: Okay, not so breaking news after all and that's what I get for not checking the Deuce of Clubs site enough. Anyway, apparently some ass has stolen the infamous Mojave Desert Phone Booth. Earth is doomed.

Some questioned whether the Booth could really be gone.

Desert Tripper: Being stuck in Florida and unable to confirm what I just read, I can only pray that it is just another disinformational plot from the establishment If it's true though, it's just another reason to flee to a third world country to be free - at least there you know where you stand when you pay the "Don."

Laura M: Is here any visual confirmation that the booth is gone? According to Pac Bell repair, the phone booth is still in action *as far as the phone company knows*. Pac Bell has no report of it being ordered removed or shut off or anything. If the booth is physically not at its usual, well known, location at "Cinder Peak," then said removal is considered VANDALISM! The Nat'l Park Service may not remove the booth *because it is private property and belong to Pacific Bell*. If the rangers or anyone else has taken it upon themselves to remove the booth then they will possibly be arrested for vandalism or they will have to put it back. If there is damage to the phone, then it may be a while before Pac Bell sends someone out to service it or check on it. At this time, it is

still ringing and as far as Pac Bell knows is in working order or it would not ring as it did when I called it 15 minutes ago. My ex-husband is a phone technician and will use his authorized equipment to check the # tomorrow.

Andrea: While I don't doubt that the NPS could (and probably did) do this, there are assholes everywhere. Anyone could have taken a truck out there and hauled it away. (Is the entire booth actually gone?) I'm keeping my eyes on eBay.

Confirmation

No one from Pac Bell would admit to having any knowledge of the Booth's disappearance. But reporter Lara drove out and saw for herself. The Mojave Phone Booth was definitely gone.

The Loneliest Phone Booth Makes its Final Disconnection
CIMA DOME - The famous telephone booth in the center of the Mojave National Preserve was unceremoniously hauled away Wednesday morning. Mary Martin, superintendent of the preserve, declined comment on the phone's disappearance and referred inquiries to Pacific Bell. Pacific Bell spokesman Steve Getzug said the phone was removed as a result of a mutual agreement with the National Park Service," but would not say who started the talks to remove the telephone which had been maintained by the company for years.

- *Desert Dispatch* (Barstow, CA)

The theft of the Booth had taken place during the dark morning hours. "We went out [to the mine) in the morning and the Phone Booth was there," Bob Ray told me. "My mother and I had just gone out to see Lorene and Terry. We got out there and stayed the night and the next morning we came out and it was gone. It was just that quick."

I asked him whether, on the way in, he had stopped to answer the phone. "I stopped, yeah. It was ringing as we came by, and so I got out of the car and answered it. It was some guy from England - London, England. Amazing, really. He said he was sitting there having tea and crumpets with his fiancée and his mother."

Before Lara had left to go photograph the empty concrete pad where the

Booth had stood for decades until the previous day, she asked a co-worker to email me for a comment for her story. At that point, I had no comments (none that were printable, anyway), only questions.

> so the booth itself hasn't been hauled away yet? do you think i could rescue it myself? i would love to set it up at a secret spot in the sonoran desert (i'm soon to purchase a *very* secluded 40-acre desert parcel)? that would make me very happy (under the circumstances, at any rate).
>
> do you need the quote right now? i mean, i think it's sad, but i don't know all the facts of the case. was the decision prompted by the nps, or by pac-bell, or was it really, as pac-bell told you, "by mutual agreement?" and what's the point of removing it? in short: why?
>
> i'll be eagerly waiting to hear what you find out there, Lara. & then i will make a comment for you.
>
> p.s.- i'm serious about coming to get the booth. i could pick it up at pac-bell's yard, wherever their yard for that area is.

I began to explore alternate possibilities for the Booth - even if disconnected - to live on in some less annoying-to-petty-bureaucrats manner. On that day, especially, I was feeling like I had really screwed up the project, to the Booth's great detriment, and was wishing for a chance to make it right somehow. Aside from that, I couldn't sec letting the Booth - an artifact of great personal importance to me - simply get dismantled or crushed in some phone company yard.

Preserve visitors Gerald Zettel and James Wielenga were disappointed when they arrived Friday afternoon and found nothing but a cement pad. "They've already shut down half the desert out here and now they are taking down the landmarks," Zettel said.

- From Lara Harley's article

A *Christian Science Monitor* article the following month claimed that "the Park Service and phone company were apparently not pleased by the visitors and growing popularity of the site, so last month the loneliest phone booth in the world was abruptly dismantled," baselessly speculating that "With more and more Americans using cellular devices, revenues from pay phones are heading downward, and companies don't hesitate to yank their equipment from unprofitable or troublesome locations."

Nonsense. You and I know exactly who was displeased by the popularity

of the Mojave Phone Booth and who had the power to use force to do something about it, and it was not the phone company.

Ray Family Reaction

For those who lived and worked in the area, the almost operatic evil of the Booth's theft under cover of darkness had immediate repercussions affecting everyone living in the area. In contrast to California bureaucrats who went to the trouble and expense of putting emergency call boxes along major roadways where cars and trucks whiz past twenty-four hours a day, agents of the United States plotted and schemed to ensure the removal of the sole dependable line of communications in a part of the desert where, without the Booth, vehicles rarely ever happened by.

Doc: When you saw that the Booth was gone, did you stop and look around?
Bob Ray: Yeah, I looked around, trying to figure out how in the world they got it out so quick.
Sharron Domingo (Lorene's sister}: My son Tony and I called Pacific Bell and asked what happened. They acted surprised to learn that it was gone. They actually told me that they would never remove the Booth. After many, many calls to various offices I was told that it was a mutual agreement between the phone company and the Park Service. We even called some government office to see why they removed it, as it was necessary for our family to have access to it in case of emergency. We pointed out the age of my mom, the point being that it endangered her well being by removing it. It didn't seem to make any difference. My son even asked them to let us keep the number and they wouldn't. We thought perhaps it could be relocated to a better area.
Bob: Yeah, the Park Service, they're great at doing things like that. They're *phenomenal* at it.
Sharron: I thought the Booth was *wonderful*. We had so much fun with it. It was terrible when they took it out. It was like a blow against *world peace*, or something!
Bob: The NPS didn't want anybody in the desert, is what it amounted to.
Doc: Which is funny, because if you look at the official Park Service literature, it's all about "Come visit the desert!" When you first saw that the Booth was gone, did you immediately think, "Ah, the Park Service did this!"
Bob: Oh, I knew they did it. Right away. There was no doubt in our minds who did it, because they'd been saying that it shouldn't be out there in the desert. They'd said it to a lot of people, that something like that shouldn't be out there. But the thing was, it was required by law. Because if you're mining, you have to have a phone, so you can call an ambulance or anything else. Well, the closest we could get a phone put in was that distance, from the mine.

There's no other way that we could get a phone.
Doc: I keep wondering, even now, if someone happens to be out there in the Mojave driving around and break down, and they have a map that still has TELEPHONE marked on it, they might walk five miles to get there and find no phone.
Bob: They'd be in big-time trouble. That's another reason - the cattlemen used it all the time out there. It was great for them if they broke down, they could call their wives or husbands or whatever, you know, to get help to come out and pick them up.

> I worked at one of the mines near there for several years off and on (1964-1977) and drove hauling cinders from there. A couple of times the phone booth was a lifesaver. We had to call an ambulance from there once.
>
> - Comment on a geocaching site under the listing for the location where the Booth once stood

Lorene: That Phone Booth saved a lot of peoples' asses out there. They'd be out there camping or hiking or whatever and break down and that was the only way. It's twelve miles to anything.
Doc: And if you were lost hiking, you'd naturally follow phone poles, but now you're out of luck. You'd get to nothing.[1]

Pacific Bell Worker Bees

I'll bet I can imagine the sort of things Bob Ray might have said to Booth callers if he had known he was the final person to answer a call on the Booth's dying day - that is, if he was, in fact, the final person to answer a call on the Booth's dying day. There were other people who were in a position to answer calls after Bob did.

Even without most of its glass, a telephone booth is a heavy object, which means it takes at least a few people to move one (which is why I'd had to hire those gang bangers to help me move mine). In the recent past, Pac-Bell phone technicians who had come out to repair the Booth or empty its coin box had in at least a few cases answered the Booth's phone. I talked to one such technician myself one day while making my daily call to the Booth.

Unless one believes large organizations are staffed with cartoon villains, one has to doubt that the Pacific Bell workers who were ordered to come out and rip out the Booth were rubbing their hands together and snickering over their conscious and willful perpetration of what they knew to be *eeeeeeevil!* while holding a comically oversized pair of wire cutters as one of them gleefully informed some caller from Europe or South America that theirs would be the final call - ever - to the Mojave Phone Booth and that in mere minutes their beloved Booth would no longer exist! *[Cue: evil laughter]*

I couldn't help but wonder, though, what was going through their minds as they walked up to the famous Mojave Phone Booth. Why did they suppose

they'd been ordered to pull it down? Did they care? Did any of them, for at least a moment, question the morality of carrying out this order?

In those days the Booth rang non-stop, so it would have been ringing right up until the moment they cut its wire. Did they wonder who, at that moment, had been on the other end of the line hoping for someone to answer? Someone from Germany, perhaps? Maybe Egypt? or Vietnam? or possibly even someone from another part of California? Did any of the repair people pause to answer the ringing phone? If so, did that person confess to having come that day to destroy the Booth forever and put a permanent stop to a little bit of harmless fun enjoyed by people the world over, revealing to the caller that he or she was taking part in the final conversation anyone would ever have via the world-famous Mojave Phone Booth? Did any of them even snap a photo of the Booth being uprooted?

It's possible, or more than possible, that any sense of fun or sadness on the pan of participating phone company employees would have been squelched by the presence of government employees who were on the scene to ensure the death sentence was carried out to their satisfaction. Bureaucrats are not generally known for their genial nature and appreciation of humor. Even if the phone company techs didn't consider it all that serious an undertaking, the bureaucrats and their flunkies did. If they were willing to go to such lengths to destroy a Phone Booth to deny the rest of the world this little scrap of fun-having, it's not hard to imagine them discouraging any fun-having on the part of Pacific Bell's worker bees and urging them to get on with the destruction of this valued historical artifact and object of widespread adoration.

Speaking of Artifacts ...

I used to wonder what became of the artifacts stolen from the Booth over the years by government employees. Back in 1999, I had received an email from Jeff V.

> I got through to the phone booth yesterday morning at about ten o'clock and talked to "Nick." He mentioned that a day or two before, a park ranger (described as a surly kind of fellow) had come out and cleaned out all the paraphernalia left at the booth (i.e. no more naked Barbie doll, flags, etc.).

Is it not comical that a leviathan that drops bombs on huge expanses of the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts and has mismanaged forests on a grand scale would wet itself over a few trinkets on a tiny, isolated, man-made object?

Five years later, I received an email with the subject line "Mojave Phone Barbie." It read like a creepy kidnapper's ransom note, which I suppose in a way it was:

> I have the Barbie from the booth. She is gold with ruby nipples, and a little sun burnt. I was present in the early morning hrs when it came down. Cash or Trade! If there is an interest I will

send photos.

The email was signed "RNG," but the email account belonged to someone named Sean Isham. By what I am sure must be a total coincidence, there just so happens to have been an NPS employee in the Mojave by that very name.

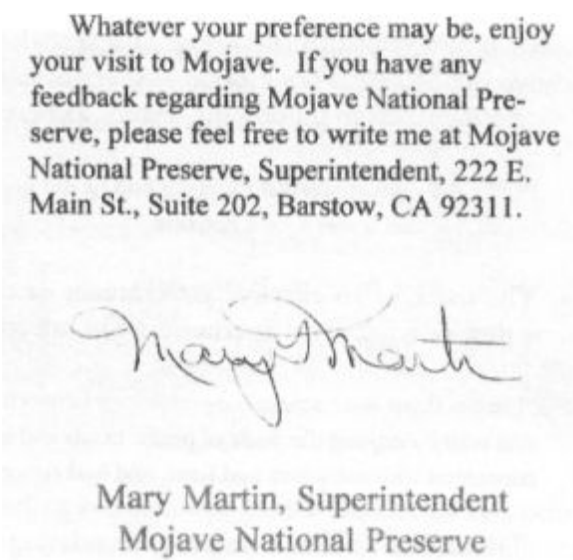
I sent several messages to that email address but received no response. I couldn't decide whether that was a surprise or an obvious outcome. Almost a decade later, I sent a private message about it to Mr. Isham's Facebook account. It too went unacknowledged. On an Instagram photo of the Booth Barbie, someone posting from an account associated with a member of Sean's family commented, "I have this Barbie!!!!!!!! I was there when the phone booth was removed!!!!"

I wonder how many of the ornaments and mementos that were left by fans at their beloved Booth and seized by NPS goons were kept as trophies (or to crassly offer for "Cash or Trade")?

Quite Contrary

> All plants, animals, rocks, historical objects, buildings, archaeological artifacts, and other natural and **cultural objects** are protected by law. Please do not disturb them in any way, leaving them intact for all visitors to enjoy.
>
> - Mojave National Preserve website (*Emphasis added*)

> The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural **and cultural** resources and intrinsic values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.
>
> - National Park Service Mission Statement (*Emphasis added*)


Whatever your preference may be, enjoy your visit to Mojave. If you have any feedback regarding Mojave National Preserve, please feel free to write me at Mojave National Preserve, Superintendent, 222 E. Main St., Suite 202, Barstow, CA 92311.

Mary Martin, Superintendent
Mojave National Preserve

The Mojave Phone Booth had been a whole lot of fun for a whole lot of people who enjoyed reading about it, calling it, visiting it, or just thinking about it. Pacific Bell had seemed happy to take advantage of the Booth's notoriety when it installed the new corporate-branded glass panes around the top of the Booth, pointedly ignoring the rest of its long-broken glass windows. Even NPS employees had claimed at various times to be pleased that the Booth was bringing visitors and attention to their new domain. The inaugural issue of the Preserve's official handout claimed that the Preserve "was established to preserve the outstanding natural, cultural, and scenic resources of this very special treasure, while also providing for scientific, educational, and recreational interests." My favorite part is, "Whatever your preference may be, enjoy your visit to Mojave" - *unless your preference happens to be to indulge your recreational interest in a Phone Booth*, I'm sure she meant to add.

A few weeks before the removal and destruction of the Booth, an NPS employee flat-out denied to a FATE magazine reporter any designs on the Booth.

> I called the Mojave National Preserve, and spoke to Ruby, one of the park rangers. Regarding be rumors proliferating on the web that the park rangers have declared war on the booth, Ruby said: That's not true. I'm one of the park rangers. We've been here for about five and a half years... and we haven't done anything at all to the booth." Ruby says that anyone and everyone is welcome to come out and enjoy their desert.

If a widely beloved historical artifact can be ripped out and carted off under cover of night by agents of a powerful bureaucracy, it's difficult to see how the possessive character of the word *their* in that sentence applies to any of us, rather than solely to the newly installed bureaucrats.

At any rate, given that everyone had been more or less happy with the Booth - or had been careful to give the appearance of being so - how then did it happen that Fay Ray and her son Bob ended up staring down at a bare wire

beside an empty concrete phone booth pad in the remote Mojave Desert on May 17, 2000?

Eventually a pretext masquerading as an answer to that question arrived in the form of a government press release in which the destruction of the Booth was unconvincingly billed as a 'joint" effort of the NPS and Pacific Bell. The carefully crafted bureaucratic statement gave forth its untruths with all the stately majesty of a big-footed, flightless bird.

After weighing the environmental concerns and public need. Paific Bell and the National Park Service agreed to remove a pay phone located in a remote pocket of the Mojave National Preserve. While the phone and its location proved to be a novelty for some in recent months the increased public traffic had a negative impact on the desert environment in the nation's newest national park.

Well, gosh. Those sure are a bunch of words strung together into sentences.

It's not as if one expects bureaucrats to do anything so unbureaucratic as tell the truth. but in the case of this Park Service press release, one almost had to admire the sheer artlessness with which whoever wrote it tossed out the lies. Its pronouncements could not have come across with more phoniness if they'd been shouted by and AS SEEN ON TV pitchman.

Note first of all the claim of a united front between Pacific Bell and the National Park Service. Compare Pacific Bell's own internal records directing technicians *never* to disconnect the Booth to Mary Martin's known hostility toward the Booth and see whether you can guess who really was forced to "agree" to remove the Mojave Phone Booth. Nevertheless, professional prevaricators for both Pacific Bell and the NPS did their best to muddy the waters, as here, in the *Los Angeles Times*.

> Pacific Bell spokesman Steve Getzug said he did not know who initiated discussions about hauling away the phone booth. He said it was a joint decision.

The mark of an effective government or corporate spokesperson is that it's hard to tell when they know they're lying. By that criterion, I'm not sure Getzug was an excellent spokesperson.

> "I know there were several conversations between Pacific Bell and the National Park Service," [Getzug] said. "It was really weighing this issue of public needs and impacts they saw happening out in the desert. I think they were concerned with campfires and litter, and had concerns about

people coming out there and getting stranded."

"I think," he said, as if he were formulating a guess on the spot, rather than repeating the exact talking points the NPS had obviously primed him to parrot. Compare the words of his counterpart spokesfibber at the NPS:

A spokesman for the Mojave National Preserve, Mike Reynolds, said park staff members have come across "a ton of trash in the area" and stranded motorists who try to get to the phone booth without four-wheel drive. One windy day, near the booth, with no one around, "there was a blazing campfire pit. It was going crazy."

"A ton of trash" - as we'll see, that's typical bureaucratic balderdash, after which (and this is almost adorable in its utter baldfacedness) he had the cheek to intone solemnly, similarly to Ranger Ruby, "Congress has set aside these lands to be preserved, protected and enjoyed by all citizens," as if his very job did not consist of lying for a mob that had just preserved and protected people everywhere from enjoying a harmless little phone booth on land they love to claim belongs to "The People."

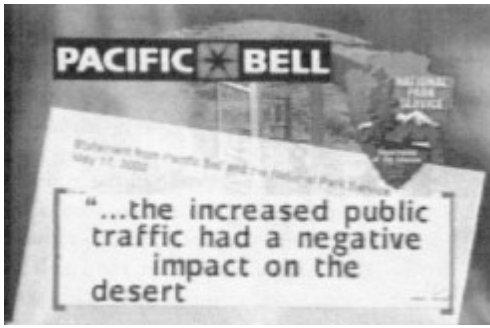
Though the destruction of the "cultural resource" of the Booth was obviously Mary Martin's doing, she didn't admit it until two years later, in a report she commissioned (and we all paid for) entitled, *From Neglected Space To Protected Place: An Administrative History of Mojave National Preserve.* In a section whose information is footnoted as having come from a personal interview with Martin herself, the following game-set-and-match admission appears:

Park Service officials "had a chat" with Pac-Bell and encouraged the phone company to remove the booth.

We all know that the word *encourage* in any bureaucratic context means the same thing it means in the sentence, "The Internal Revenue Service *encourages* everyone to pay in full the amount we demand from them." And from our viewings of *The Godfather, Goodfellas,* and *The Sopranos*, we all know exactly what the euphemism "had a chat" means. By way of her own apologia, then, Martin exposed the claim of a "joint decision" to destroy the Booth as a lie.

Let's consider for a moment the pretext Martin offered up for her unilateral decision to destroy the Booth, "Negative impact on the desert environment." Notice the absence of both content and context in that phrase. What exactly, in the context of activities associated with the Mojave Phone Booth, was "negative impact on the desert environment" supposed to mean? And again, how can it be that a government that can bomb the hell out of millions of pristine acres of desert by magically designating them "bombing ranges" can't find a way to peacefully coexist on 16 million acres with a Phone Booth and a

few of its friends and admirers?



Bureaucrats know that in today's ideologically driven and politicized culture, they can get out of having to answer questions about concrete reality by invoking that over-freighted abstraction *environment*. Anyone who had ever been to the Booth could easily see that five minutes of off-roading in a single 4x4 does more damage to the desert than all the people who ever drove to the Booth on those long-established dirt roads.

Note also Martin's casually reductive dismissal of all that had gone on over the past three years as "a novelty for some in recent months." She lies and says "months" instead of years so as to minimize the "impact" (to put it in bureaucratese) upon many thousands of people of her act of vandalism. In addition, her statement subsumes all the human connections and the different types and levels of interest in the Booth phenomenon into the single condescending word *novelty* - as if a Booth that had been there for decades and decades was somehow more of a novelty in the area than the NPS, which had been there a mere seven years.

Martin also completely failed, or refused, to address the issue of people living in the area depending on that phone. Maybe she regards other people having a telephone nearby for emergencies as a mere "novelty," but one suspects that her definition differs materially in the case of herself and her own family.

Top it all off with the appeal to simple-minded patriotism encoded in the abstraction-laden phrase *the nation's newest national park* and, *voila!* you have a typical steaming wagon load of bureaucratic word-dung. If you ever wondered why you no longer have a cool phone booth in the desert with which to "fill a musing hour with wonderment," at least you know exactly who is to blame for that.

Oddly enough, Ms. Martin almost never seemed to be available to stand up and answer for her actions. She refused even to face a local Barstow reporter who, having watched Martin duck into NPS headquarters in Barstow, was solemnly informed by a flunky that Martin was "not in the building."

Quoted in her own *Administrative History*, Martin admitted of her approach in the Mojave that "the best thing the Park Service could have done was just send out an administrative team, have someone deal with the administrative stuff, and have us just get out and meet people and say 'hi,

we're here,' and have a up of coffee with them ... You know, listen to them."

The thing is, if you style yourself a "public servant," listening to the public is pointless if you then refuse to serve the public's interest and instead act in your own self-interest. Martin did not bother to have coffee with anyone regarding her secret plan to destroy the Booth, let alone hold any public hearings. She didn't dare to. She knew all too well what people would think about it. She wasn't even going to give those who cared about the Booth the chance to hear it ring one more time or answer a farewell phone call. And she certainly was not willing to explore possibilities other than the destruction she decreed for it. That she knew no one would want her to uproot and destroy the Booth is the reason she had the theft committed in secret, early in the morning.

> With a map of the end times /I can follow a straight line / To be old Mary Marin Show 2
>
> - The New Pornographers

The Barstow *Desert Dispatch* editorial on the subject came down strongly on the side of principle.

> The removal of the famed isolated phone booth in the East Mojave Desert last week makes the point clear. National parks are not about people and shouldn't be forced into an area where people live and work.
>
> [...]
>
> Neither the NPS nor the telephone company will offer much explanation except to say visitors were causing environmental damage ... Yet this phone was sitting at a traveled crossroads where people have been stopping for decades. It's hard to imagine how a few more visitors would make much difference and many observers say there were no problems. The fact the phone really was useful to some people who live in the area doesn't matter anymore.
>
> It's ironic that the Mojave National Preserve was touted as a great tourist attraction back when it was established, but something that attracted tourists was deemed offensive and unceremoniously removed. It seems it was the wrong kind of tourist attraction - manmade rather than natural - and parks aren't really about visitors anyway. They're about preservation, and a push is on to restrict park visitation in many places. The quaint little lonely telephone booth, amusing and harmless yet useful, was a casualty of the war being fought over access to public lands.

Similarly, a letter printed in the *Los Angeles Times* could hardly have been more on target.

> Removal of the famous Mojave desert phone booth ("Requiem for a Telephone Booth," May 30) appeared to be a trivial story and basically harmless to everyone but the crazies who spent their spare time answering calls there. But the National Park Service's decision is another example of its increasing control over public lands.
>
> Its excuse that the "increased public traffic had a negative impact on the desert environment in the nation's newest national park" is its way of saying that they disapprove of anything that created interest in "their national park" that wasn't their own idea. The increased traffic is on an existing road. The people that visit camp on an area that had long ago been cleared of vegetation. This action was all about the park service's flexing its muscles and exerting power over what it considers to be its land, not the land of the public that came to enjoy it, for whatever bizarre reason. - Don Schultz, San Diego

Sadly, Martin's mendacious cover story has prevailed to this day. When people who don't know the facts undertake to recount the Booth story (and it's surprising how many people will try to tell stories of whose basic facts they are obviously ignorant), many of them include Martin's phrase verbatim "Negative impact on the desert environment" - by way of trying to explain why bureaucrats "had to" destroy the Mojave Phone Booth. In the same way, major media outlets are notorious for being content simply to repeat claims in government press releases. If you've ever wondered why bureaucrats and politicians are always releasing outrageous statements filled with obvious lies and talking points - it's *because it works*. Lies thereby become truth. I seem to recall a fellow called Orwell having written a detailed explanation of the process.

如果一个旅游地点如此受欢迎，那会怎么样呢？

Mojave电话亭位于Mojave沙漠的中心，一条土路的尽头。这个电话亭吸引了许多游客前来拜访。国家公园服务处（NPS）对于环境十分敏感，而游客数目又是如此之多，上周，NPS切断了电话线，移走了电话亭。

NPS与太平洋贝尔公司在宣布移走电话亭的联合声明中说道，“尽管最近几个月来，电话及其特殊位置使许多人感到新奇，日益增多的游客却对全天最美的国家公园的沙漠环境，造成了负面影响。”

该电话亭是在'5年以前为那些煤矿工人建立的，距离最近的公路也有15公里远。该煤矿已经关闭。

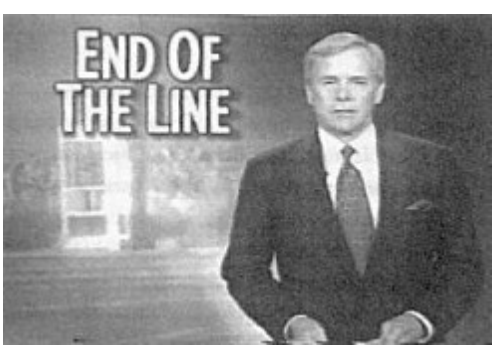
Godfrey Daniels宣称，从电话亭向外看，除了岩石以及一些树木之外，什么也看不见。Daniels是亚利桑那州的一位电脑顾问，正是他使这个电话亭名扬天下。

3年前，一位朋友告诉了Daniels这个电话，然后他便开始每天拨打这个电话，希望获得回音。

Daniels认为，一种纯粹的超自然力量使全球各地的不同人士拨打该电话（760-733-9969）。

相当长的一段时间以来，这个电话亭只吸引了少量的访客。然而在全国媒体对此事做了报道以后，好奇的探询者便

National Park, International Incident



News of the governmental destruction of the Mojave Phone Booth was carried in newspapers around the globe. It was depressing - and still is - to do a web search on that silly phrase "negative impact on the desert environment" and see how Martin's talking point was thoughtlessly parroted all over the world. Wired News, Tribune

India, BBC News and on, and on. The Booth's destruction was noted even as far away as China (*see above*).

It's remarkable that a phone booth's demise was noticed at all. More important still, in many news reports the Booth was actually *mourned*.

Once again, NBC led the way with a report sympathetic to the Booth and its fans and critical of the National Park Service's baseless aggression.

It was encouraging to see that not every media outlet was swallowing the official explanation.

Inland Empire.

Fans of the phone were given a collective "click!" And some may not even know it yet. If you call the phone booth's number, (760) 733-9969, here is no disconnect recording. It just rings and rings and rings.

[...]

"It had a negative impact on the environment out there." Getzug says officials at the preserve didn't really give him any specific examples of environmental damage. A call to preserve director Mary Martin was not returned.

"I want that booth, Daniels says. "They can't use it again. It's full of bullet boles." But Getzug says the booth probably already has been scrapped. "It was taken to a yard, and I think junked, destroyed, which is typical for equipment that's retired, famous or otherwise."

Ken Layne:
It is a tale of one man's strange crusade, the natural formation of a dedicated band of disciples. the sloppy habits of the lazy and artless American media, the allure of lonely spaces, the malicious bumbling of the federal bureaucracy, the stupid lies of a phone company.

Las Vegas SUN:
The few local residents who live in the area said they were saddened to see the landmark go. Lorene Caffee, owner of the nearby Cima Cinder Mine, said she doubted phone booth visitors were disrupting the area. I stinks." she said. "Isn't that what a park is for - for people to visit?"

"We had to do something" mouthed NPS spokesman Dennis Schramm. When you're a bureaucrat, all you have is a hammer, and you know what is commonly observed about that sad circumstance.

Wired:

"I don't think the NPS had a right to remove it." [Daniels] said "They can't say what the negative environmental impact is. If here was a negative environmental impact they should be able to say what it is."

The spokesperson for the Mojave National Preserve. which oversees he park, forwarded requests for comment on the booth situation to Pacific Bell, which didn't return phone calls. Neither did the NPS.

Route 66 Magazine:
When the phone disappeared in mid-May, Pac Bell, in the grand tradition of corporate America. bent the truth, stating they knew nothing about it. (My God. was it stolen?) The National Park Service also denied knowing anything. (Oh, no, aliens abducted it to probe its coin slot!) A couple of days later. Pac Bell admitted they had been working with the NPS for months, and it was decided to remove the booth. The Park Service used "concerns over damage to the environment" as their rationale for removing the booth. As mentioned above, we were amazed at how clean the entire area was - those who made the trek to the booth were very respectful of the fragile desert.

AlterNet:
It is with deep and profound sadness that we must report that the Mojave Phone Booth is no

more. [...] As the Web site became more popular, of course, more and more people were indeed on hand to answer the phone. Pacific Bell and the National Park Service had the phone removed last week for that very reason, claiming it was attracting too many curiosity-seekers. Which is generally the purpose of a National Preserve, but still.

Lonely Planet's California (Regional Guide) (4th edition):
The NPS alleged that all the traffic was negatively affecting the environment. To some, the Phone Booth symbolized a greater controversy over land-use rights in the Mojave National Preserve. It seemed that everyday folks had lost out to the feds - again.

Some reporters, instead of repeating the NPS press release verbatim, just made up reasons. A BBC reporter wrote, "It seems there had been complaints that the incessant ringing was shattering the serenity of the landscape." The claim was then echoed elsewhere, most bizarrely in a German-language novel:

The constant demand on the phone line was regarded by the manufacturer, Pacifc Bell, as a wrongful use of the telephone service, on top of that environmental activists were upset by the incessant ringing in the middle of the desert, which supposedly disrupted the daily routine of certain animal species.

That's LIFE

THE world's loneliest pay phone has rung for the last time.

The US booth was put in the Mojave desert in the 1960s for nearby miners.

But the phone company decided to remove it after it attracted Internet attention three years ago.

People around the globe would dial the number just to see if anyone answered.

At least that claim is ludicrous enough to be kind of funny.

Years after the government destroyed the Booth, there was an article about it in one of the popular *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader* books, in which the words of Mary Martin were repeated yet again:

Unfortunately, in 2000 the National Park Service and Pacific Bell tore down the famous Mojave phone booth. Reason? It was getting too many calls. The traffic (20 to 30 visitors a day) was starting to have a negative impact on the fragile desert environment.

Note how with time "20 to 30 visitors a week" had become in the retelling "20 to 30 visitors a day," although even had the latter been the case, it would hardly have constituted the invasion of the Visigoths envisioned by the area's real invaders. Mary Martin's lies spread almost as fast as Nick von Robison's original lie that gave rise to the Booth phenomenon in the first place.

When the *Uncle John's* article began making the rounds of so many Internet sites that even I couldn't fail to notice, I wrote up a quick response at one of the more popular sites, Neatorama, just to, I don't know, *bear witness*, I guess.

> Hola. Doc here, from Deuce of Clubs.
>
> The *Bathroom Reader* folks never contacted me before they published their write-up, so I thought I'd set a couple of things straight here, in lieu of going over to Wikipedia and throwing a mild onscreen tantrum at its Mojave Phone Booth entry.
>
> The phone booth that came to be known as the Mojave Phone Booth was a historical object of long-standing use in the area and, as such, should have been preserved (certainly according to the Historic Sites Act of 1935 (49 Sat. 666; 16 U.S.C. 461-467)). One wouldn't have thought preservation would be an issue in a self-styled "Preserve" such as the Mojave National Preserve. In fact, the greeting from the first issue of the official handout of the newly created "Preserve" claimed that the Preserve "was established to preserve the outstanding natural, cultural, and scenic resources of this very special treasure," while their website warned all visitors that
>
> "All plants, animals, rocks, historical objects, buildings, archaeological artifacts, and other natural and cultural objects are protected by law. Please do not disturb them in any way, leaving them intact for all visitors to enjoy."
>
> Why, then, would the NPS destroy the Booth - and secretly, without public hearings or warning of any kind?
>
> Many outlets (including, appropriately, the *Bathroom Reader*) have uncritically repeated then Superintendent Mary Martin's vague excuse as it appeared in the NPS's lone public statement on the subject: "increased public traffic had a negative impact on the desert environment." Mary Martin never offered a shred of proof of this. And it wasn't "20 to 30 visitors a day" - it was actually 25 to 30 visitors a *wee. So it's odd that at the time that the newly arrived NPS in the Mojave was publishing tourist material practically begging people to come and visit the "Preserve," Commandant Martin decided that, as NBC's Roger O'Neil sarcastically put it in his report on the NPS's destruction of the Booth, "In other words, despite 1.6 MILLION acres of sand, cactus, Joshua trees, and snakes, too many people - 25 to 30 a week - were tramping way out of their way to answer the phone."
>
> Martin knew very well that the reason she gave for destroying the Booth was bullshit (most Booth visitors would in fact clean up the area when they'd visit, and they drove in on established roads that had existed for decades - i.e., they weren't off-roading), but she kept on with her charade, going so far as accusing me of hauling out the pile of white decorative rocks near the Booth, when those rocks had been there for years & years & everyone who lived out there knew how they'd gotten there.
>
> (I have my own theory to explain Martin's single-minded vendetta on the Booth. and it has nothing to do with protecting the desert and everything to do with a bureaucrat covering her ass in the spotlight of all the publicity the Booth was generating, which could prove detrimental to the career of a government flunky who - before the Booth rose to fame - appears to have taken other unilateral and illegal actions against some of the people who had been living in the Mojave since before she herself was old enough to wear baby (jack) boots.)
>
> Doc

Reaction Across the Internet

In order to appear more intimidating, Sandy Koufax didn't shave on days he was pitching. I'll maybe skip shaving if I'm meeting a Craigslist seller, but otherwise I generally try to be as non-confrontational (and clean-shaven) as I can. I did, however, encourage those who were emotionally and imaginatively

invested in the Booth to act according to their hearts. On the Mojave Phone Booth's home page. I wrote:

> There's no more calling the phone. So why not phone a National Park office, instead. You an call Mary Martin [*phone number deleted*] to let her know what you think of the Booth removal.
>
> Updates will appear here, as they come in. If you have more information about the Booth's disappearance, please share it with the rest of the class.
>
> Then call Mary Martin [*phone number deleted*]. Share it with her. Sharing is good.
>
> Call Mary Martin [*phone number delete*]. Do it. Do it Do it till you're satisfied.

It was funny that articles worldwide quoted the "Do it" part, as later would the NPS's own *Administrative History*: "Daniels posted Superintendent Martin's park phone number and email address on his website, and exhorted booth supporters to call: 'Do it. Do it. Do it till you're satisfied." Am I the only one who remembers that fun old B.T. Express song?

I was soon given to understand from well-placed sources that the calls, letters, and emails made Ms. Martin feel "persecuted," in that special way that only people who wield power over others seem able to feel persecuted.

Many Booth fans wrote emails and letters of complaint to their various Senator Mooncalfs and Representative Dimwittys.

Terry Caffee: I heard Mary Martin and Diane Feinstein had to get new phone numbers.

Lorene Caffee: Do you have any idea how anyone got Mary Martin's cell phone number? [*laughs*]

The politicians, those fine seivants of he public did, of course, what in all other cases I would prefer bureaucrats do - nothing.

The NPS's *Administrative History* admitted that

> The Park Service was deluged with emails, phone calls, and letters from outraged supporters of the telephone booth... Many pro-booth correspondents pointed out the appearance of hypocrisy: "[I]sn't this a form of recreation? I thought our system of National Parks was for recreational use?" Almost all protested NPS claims of environmental damage in the area. Some took issue with other parts of the boilerplate NPS reply, which charged booth visitors with bringing decorative white quartz rock to the site and interpreted a note that one user left at the booth reminding visitors to the keep the area clean as evidence of the volume of trash left behind by visitors. Others were threats, including one bomb threat that sounded serious enough to prompt the Park Service to call the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Many supporters attempted to verbalize their affections for the booth: "It had SOMETHING ... something about it was almost mysterious." "Folks ... had a possibility to get out for a while from their every day life ... " "I'll probably be mourning its death on and off for the rest of my life."

The NPS viewpoint was countered in the *Los Angeles Times*, which quoted Kaarina, the filmmaker who made the documentary about the Booth as her thesis.

> Fans of the phone booth challenged the officials' statements, saying that they took care to pick up trash. Regulars at the site said that they did not notice abandoned campfires and that locals helped out stuck motorists.
>
> In fact, said Kaarina Roberto, a USC graduate student, people took pride in the spot. Roberto, 28, was skeptical when she first started investigating the site as the possible subject of a thesis for her visual anthropology major. Then she and her husband began camping there, answering the

phone as it rang all night.

"When we first heard people say they cared about it, it sounded kind of weird," she said. "But it's caring about what it represents ... it represents the positive aspects of humanity, a diverse group of people who share some common ground, a shared humanity."

She was stunned by the news of its removal.

It sounds really preposterous," she said, "but it felt almost like a death of a community that has formed, unlike anything else you've ever experienced."

Quoted in the same article was Andrea, my new friend to whom the Booth had introduced me.

> I was inspired to go see the desert for myself. And it changed my life. If it took a silly telephone booth to give me that, I'm thankful and can't question it too much. I'm sad beyond words that it's gone, but it's a sadness over the circumstances of its removal - that the park isn't truly for the people, if that's the way the rangers see it.

The *Administrative History* claimed further that

> The NPS did receive a small number of letters in support of its action, from the National Parks Conservation Association and other individuals who resented the booth as a man-made intrusion inconsistent with the features that were supposed to exist in national parks.

The claim that the NPS actually received such letters is open to question, of course, but the larger question is the claim of the Booth being "a man-made intrusion inconsistent with the features that were supposed to exist in national parks," a word salad that has neither conceptual clarity nor concrete meaning. Just taking the word intrusion, for example: how could the Booth have been an intrusion in an area where it had been sitting for many decades before the forced imposition of "national park" status, in the form of the NPS's own very real intrusion into the area? I find it suspicious that an idea the official NPS document attributed to nameless "other individuals" is very close to the idea found in the anonymous warning letter I received shortly before the NPS destroyed the Booth, expressing the abstraction-centric attitude not of ordinary human beings but of bureaucrats:

> *Park managers believe the booth is not compatible with the purpose of a national park.*

Was the destruction of the Booth in any genuine sense the will of "the People?" If we're talking actual, living human beings, not some risible Rousseauian abstraction even Rousseau himself was not crazy enough to believe in literally, we can accurately say it was the will of only a few people - and maybe only one person. It's funny that in a government said to be of, by, and for an abstract, that is, non-existent, entity called "The People," the overwhelming will of the great majority of real, existing people means nothing in comparison to the will of a petty bureaucrat.

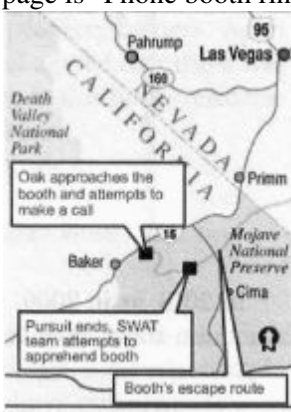
People angered or saddened by the Booth's destruction continued to make their thoughts known online.

> The National Park Service did a disservice to the people and removed the booth in May 2000, claiming it had become a nuisance and was incompatible with the uses of the park. So with a change of cell phones and knowing the phone booth was gone anyway, I no longer included the entry "MDPB 760-733-9969" in my cell's address book. You know, I think I will put it back in right now. They can take the phone booth out of the desert, but they can't take it out of my life.
>
> - hypnagogic

A poet unknown to me called "Jimmr" wrote a sort of elegy on the subject of the Booth's demise, which ended as follows:

> clandestine they came
> [...]
> another monument gone
> now nothing's there
> where voices
> met for awhile
> in middle of nowhere
> the booth
> and runaway slave technology
> went feral
> until the ones that work for us
> hunted it down

Someone at ytmnd.com (which stands for "You're the man, now, dog," a bizarre, obscure line of Sean Connery dialogue) did a farewell YTMND for the Booth, with a beautiful photo of the Booth accompanied by the sound of a ringing phone and a loop from Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." The title of the page is "Phone booth rings into your soul.".



Satire site Reality Syndicate attributed the Booth's disappearance to its attack upon a caller, followed by a Phone Booth rampage, with a fugitive Booth eluding a SWAT team and making into the desert toward Nevada - for my money, a sequence of events less bizarre than what really happened.

One of my favorite reactions came from someone on Usenet: "How the hell is Wile E. Coyote gonna order stuff from ACME now?"

New Lies

Whatever Mary Martin was trying to cover up by destroying the Booth and its fame's ability to draw attention to her previously free hand in her new theater of operations, the outpouring of international attention must have made her fear that her decision to destroy the Booth might be backfiring. Although the boot of a bureaucracy is huge and its tread careless (with whatever falls beneath it regarded as expendable as an ant or a Branch Davidian), and although bureaucrats are far less subject to consequences than their subjects, they can, in rare cases, experience repercussions.

Martin therefore altered her PR strategy, attempting instead to play the part of Beleaguered Public Servant Striving To Do What Is Best for the Benighted Wastrels Albatrossed Around Her Poor Neck. Accordingly, in response to a letter from Booth visitor and enthusiast "Desert Tripper,"[3] she deigned - or as appears to be more likely, was compelled by a higher-up - to speak on the record for the first time, as far as I'm aware, since her initial press release after ordering the Booth destroyed.

> United Sates Department of the Interior
> NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
> Mojave National Preserve
> 222 East Main Street, Suite 202
> Barstow, California 92311
>
> June 9, 2000
>
> This is in response to your letter to John Reynolds, Regional Director, Pacific West Region, dated May 23, 2000, regarding the removal of the telephone booth on Cima Dome in Mojave National Preserve.
>
> The phone booth was the property of, and ultimately removed by, Pacific Bell; not the National Park Service.

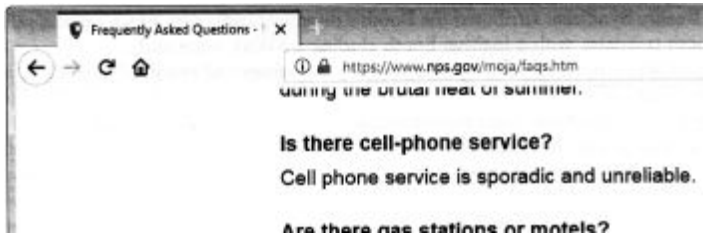
Well, why *not* start right off with a big, fat lie? (For any readers who happen to be government functionaries, that question was rhetorical, obviously.)

Obviously, it was technically true that "The phone booth was the property of, and ultimately removed by, Pacific Bell," but you will recall that Martin's own commissioned history of her short reign admits that here she was telling a tiny truth in order to sell a huge lie. The truth was that "Park Service officials 'had a chat' with Pac-Bell and encouraged the phone company to remove the booth." The direct cause of the destruction of the Booth was not phone company employees but National Park Service employee Mary Martin. (It is of course possible that Martin was acting on the order of someone higher up the food chain in the NPS, but I am not aware of anyone making that claim, not even Ms. Martin.)

> New technologies have replaced the need for the telephone.

That is not only another lie but another lie contradicted by a public communication by the NPS itself. The Mojave National Preserve website

FAQ in 2018 - eighteen years after Martin destroyed the Mojave Phone Booth - *still* includes the following warning to prospective visitors to the area:


Frequently Asked Questions -
https://www.nps.gov/moja/faqs.htm
Is there cell-phone service?
Cell phone service is sporadic and unreliable.

In 2018, as in2000, you cannot count on cell service in the Mojave National Preserve. But Martin's false claim about "new technologies" obviating the Booth was nothing more than subterfuge, anyway, of course. Even if cell phone service in the area were widespread and dependable, cell service or the lack of it had not the slightest thing to do with Martin's Ahab-like vendetta against the Booth.

> Under the terms of the right-of-way, without a valid agreement Pacific Bell was obligated to remove their private property and restore the right-of-way to preinstallation conditions.

If restoring the right-of-way "to preinstallation conditions" were truly the aim, it's hard to imagine the miles and miles of telephone line and poles crossing her domain wouldn't be a larger object of Martin's concern than a telephone booth with a footprint of about nine whole square feet. Then again, because the entire line was installed during World War II, one would expect that the poles and phone line would fall under the category of historical artifacts. But the crux of the matter is expressed by that breezy bureaucratic passive verb they use to euphemize coercion: *obligated*.

> We understand the uniqueness of this phone booth; however, once it gained notoriety, it attracted numerous visitors and, unfortunately, not all visitors to the site share your ethic. Not only has there been documented resources damage (fire burning, large gatherings without permit, garbage scattered, vegetation damage and posted graffi) ...

Martin's claims here were contradicted by voluminous testimony from Booth visitors, such as a woman quoted in a WIRED article:

> "I was very impressed at how clean and untarnished the area was for being so popular," wrote Robin, who visited last month. "There was no trash or debris, no trampled plants, no broken glass. It looks to me like the people who have taken the time to visit the booth were very aware of keeping things in order."

Lorene Caffee: We could look out the bedroom window at night and see bonfires. We'd always know when someone was camped there. A lot of people camped there.
Terry Caffee: And as many people camped there and stayed overnight, it was amazing how clean that place always was.

Lorene: They always cleaned everything up. It was never a problem.
Doc: Mary Martin says
Lorene: I know. She's a liar. There was never a problem with it.

I asked Charlie Wilcox whether he ever saw any unattended bonfires at the Booth.

Charlie: No. Nope.
Doc: I actually made a nice fire ring, and the NPS came out and -
Charlie: Yeah, they come out and took that apart. I took firewood out there and piled it up for people.

> but private property owners have also been disturbed.

Given the massive disturbances committed by the NPS against long-time Mojave residents, it strains all credulity to believe the NPS gave two figs for Booth fans disturbing private property owners. Apart from that, this claim is yet another lie. I've talked to lots of people in the area. All agreed that there was only one person who had a problem with Booth visitors. As you've read elsewhere in this book, residents said repeatedly that everyone else in the area was fine with the Booth's newfound fame.

Of all Mary Martin's clumsy lies in this matter, the next one might be her clumsiest:

> In addition, several truck loads of white decorative rocks were brought to the area by phone visitors who then outlined messages in the desert.

It isn't unusual for toddlers to tell laughably disprovable lies, but it's fairly remarkable in an adult. This wasn't even the first time Martin had told this whopper. Like a toddler, she just kept repeating it, having lied herself into a corner, probably assuming the Booth outcry would die down quickly.

Initially, I was the one accused of having hauled those decorative rocks out to the desert, which is laughable. I abhor the ridiculous fake desert rock landscapes of desert suburbias, so it's absurd to believe I would impose any such thing on genuine desert, which I love. Correctly informing herself would have required that Martin merely take a cursory look at the Booth's website, where I spell out exactly how we happened upon that pile of rocks and exactly what we did with them. In her letter Martin shifts the blame to "phone visitors." Maybe someone better able to read explained things to her and she made her scapegoat generic, rather than admit to being wrong.
Doc: Mary Martin accused me of bringing that white rock out there.
Charlie: No!
Doc: You mentioned that you know who did that.
Charlie: One of the trucks loaded up in Vegas to deliver his rock. When he got up here, he only had emptied one bin of his truck. He had doubles. And when he come out to the mine to get some cinders, I run up there with my

loader, looked in, and here's this pile of white rock. I wouldn't let him dump it at the mine. I said, "No, we can't have that in that red rock." That wouldn't go at all. I said, "You'll have to take it out someplace else and dump it." So, I'm coming home that night from work, here's that white rock at the Phone Booth! He took it down there and dumped it.
Doc: What year do you suppose that was?
Charlie: Oh, I don't remember now.
Rena: Had to be in the 80s.
Charlie: Yeah, somewhere around there.
Lorene: That pile of rocks was there a long time before Mary Martin ever -
Terry: Before she ever came to that side of Cima Dome.
Lorene: That was there before we were.

That pile of white rocks had been sitting there a decade or more before I ever laid eyes on it. (And had I been nutty enough to haul rocks out there, that's pretty small potatoes compared to, oh, I don't know, say, defacing an entire mountain with gigantic carved faces of politicians, as I hear was done in a certain other location under NPS jurisdiction.)

> Pacific Bell and the National Park Service received numerous complaints from local property owners.

Again, according to area residents themselves, there was but one disgruntled local. One wonders how many of these "numerous" complaints would turn up in a Freedom of Information Act request (one honestly fulfilled, that is).

> Since the phone gained notoriety, the increased traffic resulted in vandalism, trespass, unattended campfires, stranded and lost visitors, and other problems. These issues made it necessary for the National Park Service to increase patrols to the area to ensure that visitors did not cause resource damage, exceed their camping authorization, violate wilderness values and, as necessary, to provide appropriate help and assistance.

Predictably for a bureaucrat, Martin tacks on actually helping people at the end, only as an afterthought. Would she have complained about visitors who were responding to the invitation in her Preserve's official newspaper that they visit "their" National Preserve? No, because those visitors wouldn't have been bringing international scrutiny to her actions in the area.

> The proliferation of trash required that our maintenance worker, from Baker, CA, conduct several clean-up drives in this area, all necessitated by visitor impacts.

If there's anything almost as ugly as bureaucratic behavior, it's bureaucratic language. "Visitor impacts?" Yeesh!

But to the point, it seems as if I read somewhere that NPS employees at Yellowstone Park solved the Gordian Knot-like problem of trash left behind by its *three million* annual visitors by the brilliant tactic of putting out trash cans. Hell, a dozen people a year *die* at the NPS-run Grand Canyon, yet

somehow in Martin's view, a handful of people per month formed a clear and present danger to the *1.6 million square miles* ruled over by the most powerful government in all of human history.

I must tell you that I found her complaint somewhat less than compelling. I'm sure even a bureaucrat is capable of developing a comprehensive trash-gathering plan, if only by leaving the actual planning and execution to some expensive government contractor. But doesn't it seem strange that people who didn't want to be burdened with looking after visitors in a given area would print official literature inviting visitors to come and enjoy that area? The NPS slogan "Visit YOUR National Parks!" sounded even more hollow after the NPS destroyed the Mojave Phone Booth.

I'll skip Martin's penultimate paragraph because it's only a few sentences repeating the claims of a guy who said he saw trash at the Booth. I'll just mention that this very same witness also claimed he saw alien spaceships at the Booth. Do you suppose Mary Martin put the same credence in his alien spaceship claims as she did in his trash claims? But one goes to trial with the witnesses one has, not the witnesses one would like.

The bulk of witness testimony supported the fact that Booth visitors made special efforts to keep the Booth area clean. For example:

> *Route 66 Magazine.* Another cool point is the area is clean. There is no litter. You bring it in, you haul it out, is the unspoken rule out here.

> Jon H.:
> I was surprised what good shape the phone is in compared to any of its city brethren. It is now graced with a pink flamingo brought by one of the Las Vgas people. The area around the phone is very dean.

Charlie: All the trash that ever come out there I'd take out. I'd bring it out of there myself.
Doc: The only trash I ever saw there was a little bit from some Mormon Boy Scouts that came through there. Banana peels and such. I took it out.
Professor Cardyhouse: How often would you be at the booth?
Charlie: Every day.
Cardyhouse: *Every day*. If you saw any trash, you took. it out?
Charlie: Yeah, I picked it up. Yeah.
Cardyhouse: So there goes the NPS's claim.
Charlie: We had guys go out there and camp out, they'd bag the trash and put it in one spot for us. We had people go out there and pick up cigarette butts around it.
Doc: As did we.

Finally comes (with apologies to Kierkegaard) Martin's concluding insincere "Sincerely," preceded by the regal false gratitude customarily found at the end of bureaucratic communications with the serfs.

> Thank you for sharing your thoughts and concerns regarding the are of resources ar Mojave National Preserve.

Sincerely,
Mary G. Martin
Superintendent

A thank you in this context can scarcely be read as anything other than sarcasm, the equivalent of that sardonic "Have a nice day!" cops know very well no one wants to hear after receiving a written demand for money on the pretext of some ticky-tack nonsense perpetrated in order to meet a quota.

Clearly, Martin's excuses were *ex post facto* nonsense ginned up and distributed in an attempt to justify her destruction of the Mojave Phone Booth. In the looking-glass world of officialdom, it's sentence first, trial after.

Three small lines at the bottom of the letter explain why Martin bothered to respond at all to a mere *mundane* (as the late Will Grigg used to refer to non-governmental people), instead of continuing to hide in her office incommunicado.

cc:
John J. Reynolds
Lee Johnson, Pacific Bell

Desert Tripper, you'll recall, had sent his letter not to Martin but to NPS Pacific West Regional Director John J. Reynolds, who passed it back down to Martin. You know what they say rolls downhill.

Comparative Cases

Something similar to what happened to the Mojave Phone Booth happened three decades earlier to Zzyzx (rhymes with Isaacs), a Mojave settlement founded in 1944 by radio preacher Curtis Howe Springer as headquarters for the worldwide radio broadcasts he used to publicize his beliefs and cures, which he did until 1968, when, as Dennis Casebier recounts in his *Mojave Road Guide*, "BLM commenced legal action against the Springers to evict them from the land at Zzyzx. By then they had been living there and improving the site for 24 years. We may never know what motivated the Government to do this." (With that last part Casebier was perhaps being facetious, or at least cautious.)

> On April 11, 1974 (Good Friday), after spending nearly 30 years there, Dr. and Mrs. Springer were bodily evicted from Zzyzx. They had 36 hours to remove their personal property accumulated over a period of 30 years. They were threatened with handcuffs and escorted off the property by armed deputies. Zzyzx was returned to the public domain under custody of the victor - the Bureau of Land Management.
>
> Suddenly BLM had a white elephant on their hands. They had never known all those years as they pursued the case against Springer what use they might make of Zzyzx should they be successful. And now they had won. They had no budget to take care of Zzyzx. The rats and cockroaches moved in; and even worse, even though caretakers were on the site at least part of the time, vandals began to destroy the buildings and other property.

A comparable fate befell Mitchell Caverns, another popular Mojave site, after it was transferred from private to governmental control. As a cost-cutting measure, state bureaucrats abandoned the fragile cave system, which then suffered entirely predictable and completely preventable damage, according to a *Los Angeles Times* article.

> After valuables were removed, the property was left unguarded, parks officials said.
>
> "The state locked up the place and then walked away, leaving it wide open to troublemakers," said Dennis Casebier, executive director of the nonprofit Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Assn.
>
> Several times in the last four months, vandals traveled 16 desolate miles north from Interstate 40 to plunder and damage the park's isolated structures. Their actions left advocates for the caverns angry at the state.

Casebier concludes the Zzyzx tale:

> By late 1975, apparently pursuing a course of desperation, BLM decided that what they really wanted all along for Zzyzx was to return it to the condition it was in before Springer came there. "Push the buildings into the lake" became the watchword.
>
> At about that time, a group of colleges and universities from the California State system began to express interest in making use of the site as some kind of studies center. The "destroy the buildings" orders were held in abeyance as negotiations were made and possibilities explored. BLM rethought its position. They didn't want to push the buildings into the lake after all! What they really wanted all along was a desert studies center!

Springer had offered to pay back rent to the BLM, but the government refused his money. Money wasn't the object but rather control.

In the case of the Booth, Pacific Bell had an existing easement. The payments had allegedly been forgotten and were in arrears, as Mary Martin was careful to search out and exploit as her trap to spring on the Booth. I'd be interested to know the total amount of those back easement fees. Pacific Bell was evidently unwilling to pay it, but I'll bet enough people around the world loved the Booth that we could have taken up a collection large enough to cover the NPS's demands. But that would have run counter to Martin's goal of ending international attention to her actions in the area.

Another solution that could easily have worked is suggested by the case of the Mojave Memorial Cross. Placed atop Sunrise Rock in honor of WWI dead in 1934, the cross didn't become a point of contention until six decades later. The renaming of the area "Mojave National Preserve" suddenly brewed up controversy where there had been none, in the form of a church-state fracas beginning in 1999, when the ACLU complained about the Cross to the NPS, which immediately agreed to remove it.

However, because the Cross concerned both religion and the military, California politicians were willing to jump in and fight for it, something they proved unwilling to do for a poor, non-sectarian Phone Booth. The fracas dragged on for over a decade, even after the black frocks decreed by a vote of 5 to 4 that the Cross could stay.

Shortly afterward, wouldn't you just know it, the thing was stolen. In response to the theft, some person or persons unknown secretly installed a

replica Cross (though the original Cross was eventually found). The controversy was finally settled with an agreement between the Department of Justice and the ACLU "to exchange an acre of land at Sunrise Rock for a donated parcel of equal value." According to the Mojave National Preserve website, the parcel was in turn

> conveyed to the California Veterans of Foreign Wars. In accordance with the settlement agreement, the National Park Service has installed a fence around the parcel with signs indicating that the plot is private property. Two entrance areas remain unfenced to allow public access, also required by the settlement. The National Park Service installed a plaque on Sunrise Rock describing this memorial.

Thus, although the Cross is today surrounded by NPS property, it's no longer technically an NPS property. It's difficult to read that without seeing that a similar arrangement could *easily* have been effected in order to save the Mojave Phone Booth, had it not been the objcect of the NPS supervisor"s vendetta. It's fairly certain that someone, perhaps even the Ray family, would have been willing to donate an acre in exchange for the acre on which the Booth sat.

Admittedly, it seems likely, if not certain, that even if a land swap or full easement payment had been offered, it wouldn't have altered the Booth's fate. Martin, determined to have her pound of Booth, would simply have moved on to a different pretext for its destruction.

Break Up the Concrete

> But it ain't no more. it's all gone, gone, gone
> .....
> Break up the concrete
> .....
> We were so busy worrying about them dropping the bomb
> We didn't notice where our enemy was really coming from
>
> - The Pretenders

Despite overtures and pleas from friends and well-wishers everywhere, neither the National Park Service nor Pacific Bell Telephone Company (almost certainly under governmental threat) would reveal where they had taken the Mojave Phone Booth or what they had done to it. It has not been seen since.

Though its removal had been the subject of considerable governmental machination, officially the Phone Booth was so insignificant to the NPS that no mention of their destruction of it, or even just the plain fact of its sudden disappearance, made it into their daily *National Park Service Morning Report*, Perhaps it was officially barred from mention.

It was certainly not insignificant to its friends and admirers. Almost instantly, memorial objects began appearing where the Booth had stood, all of

which were promptly carted away, presumably by minions of a superintendent afraid of any possible rallying points. Charlie Wilcox showed me a photo of some of the same white rocks we had used that someone had used to spell out "BOOTH WAS HERE." To prevent future pro-Booth messages, someone - we can probably guess who - came out and loaded up the entire pile of white rocks and hauled them away, and ineptly, at that.

Terry Caffee: Somebody picked all those white rocks up, put them in a trailer, went down towards Stuckey's and lost it. Evidently this trailer didn't have any brakes on it or something. I saw where they slid off the road and all this white rock scattered around. Later, they picked it all back up. They picked every bit of that white rock up.

The BBC reported, "All that remains now [of the Booth) is the concrete base. Some people are predicting that this too might now become a tourist attraction." Indeed, this seemed likely, as more than a few websites made clear. In the words of one Booth fan, "Someday I still hope I'll be able to venture out there and see the concrete slab where this wonderful thing used to be."

There being no sensible bounds to bureaucratic paranoia, they swooped down yet again upon the site where the Booth had stood in order to jackhammer the concrete pad to pieces and cart every piece of it away, just as they had removed the pad's reason for being there in the first place. The paranoia was similar to that of a more ancient empire:

> Faced with the stake, he refused to recant any of his positions; since he remained a hero to large sections of the Roman people and the minor clergy, his ashes were cast into the Tiber, to prevent his burial place becoming venerated as the shrine of a martyr.
>
> - Wikipedia article, "Arnold of Brescia"

It called to mind the old Soft Boys song "I Wanna Destroy You": "And when I have destroyed you / I'll come picking at your bones/ And you won't have a single atom left/ To call your own."

Swiss journalist Peter Glasser pointed out a natural Mojave Phone Booth analogue, the Tree of Ténéré (L'Arbre du Ténéré), a tree in the Sahara Desert "once considered the most isolated tree on Earth - the only one for over 400 kilometers (250 mi)," according to Wikipedia, which goes on to relate that "The Tree of Ténéré was knocked down by an allegedly drunk Libyan truck driver in 1973. On November 8, 1973, the dead tree was moved to the Niger National Museum in the capital Niamey. It has since been replaced by a simple metal sculpture representing the tree."

There is a bronze memorial set in concrete in the Mojave on the spot where the Joshua tree stood whose photo appeared on the U2 album of that name. There's also a message container, all manner of tributes and trinkets, and people use rocks to spell out messages on the ground there. It's on BLM land, and if the BLM has thrown a cry fit over it like the NPS did over the Booth memorials, I haven't heard about it.

A kind Booth admirer did construct and erect at the Booth site a beautiful, full-sized tombstone for the Booth. You can guess what NPS rangers did to the Booth's tombstone. I suppose it would have made no difference but maybe the tombstone's epitaph should have included the plea from that of Cyrus of Persia: "DO NOT BEGRUDGE ME THIS SMALL MONUMENT." Had I made a tombstone for the Booth, I'd have been tempted to engrave upon it a few of the choice words the mother of Jesse James caused to be carved on the marker of her son's grave.

Someday the NPS will probably decide to make use of the Booth legend for its own purposes and erect a historical marker at the Booth site. Whatever they inscribe upon that marker will doubtless be both wildly contrary to fact and unintentionally hilarious.

Why the Dick Move, Mary?

Of all this governmental destruction and paranoia, Andrea said, "It's just mean-spirited!" And it seemed to be, certainly, yet I have a hard time believing that it was only that. Contra H. L. Mencken's characterization of the Puritans, I've never believed that there exist many people who genuinely harbor "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" (although when I expressed that thought to Rena Wilcox, she made a face that made everyone in the room laugh and said, "You must not deal with people very much").

Obviously I'm aware that people commit wrongful acts. I'm just not sure I believe many people, or maybe even any of them, commit those acts purely for the sake of doing wrong, without some goal they consider good and hope to gain from it. I sure wouldn't like to believe that, anyway.

It seems more likely to me that people who do evil things either do not believe what they're doing is evil, refuse to believe it is evil, or regard it as a so-called "necessary" evil. And one can respect even the latter, to the degree

that at least they're at least candid about it, as Stalin was with Lady Astor, telling her "As long as it's necessary" in response to her demand to know how long he intended to keep murdering people. Evil, yes, but at least honest.

Speaking of so-called necessary evils, let's talk about one of the largest. Thanks to dense, overlapping thickets of bureaucracies, we are all of us, at all times, at the mercy of various bureaucrats, the only people who get to legally use violence-backed threats to coerce people into obeying them. We don't usually think of them in that way, but we ought to. Disputes with bureaucrats don't end in tickle fights, after all.

> Someone in Washington had pressed a button, said a word, and their homes and community were no more.
>
> - Paul Bailey, *City in the Sun: The Japanese Concentration Camp at Poston, Arizona*

It surprises me how often I run across people who cling tenaciously to a faith in the decisions of government employees as not only just but even reasonable.

> FDR imagined he could fix the world gold price from his bedroom. Morgenthau reported that when be visited FDR on Friday, November 3, he suggested a 10- or 15-cent rise from the previous day, and FDR decided on a 21-cent rise. Morgenthau asked the rationale for 21 cents, and FDR reportedly replied that three times seven is a lucky number.
>
> - Jim Powell *FDR's Folly*

I believe Mary Martin's likely rationale for destroying the Mojave Phone Booth was every bit as unilateral and capricious as Roosevelt's. But I do not believe it was random.

We've already seen that her environmental complaint was bogus. She knew better than anyone it was a lie. She must have been lying to conceal some other motive for the Booth theft, a motive about which she has never come clean, as far as I know. Likely the only sense in which she was protecting the environment is if we understand her to be talking about the environment immediately surrounding her desk chair.

During the Clinton administration, government employees and fellow travelers claimed that being a "National Preserve" would be good for the area because its new status would draw in visitors. It would have been of benefit to Martin's professional standing to receive more visitors. After all, that could only increase her power.

Of course, there are always factors of personality. Comic Frankie Boyle suggests that "Perhaps a side effect of coming into political power is to develop a hatred of ordinary people."

There is certainly evidence to support Boyle's contention, but I suspect the answer in this instance more probably lies in Pournelle's Iron Law of Bureaucracy.

> In any bureaucratic organization there will be two kinds of people:
>
> First, there will be those who are devoted to the goals of the organization. Examples are dedicated classroom teachers in an educational bureaucracy, many of the engineers and launch

technicians and scientists at NASA, even some agricultural scientists and advisers in the former Soviet Union collective farming administration.

Secondly, there will be those dedicated to the organization itself. Examples are many of the administrators in the education system, many professors of education, many teachers union officials, much of the NASA headquarters staff, etc.

The Iron Law states that in every case the second group will gain and keep control of the organization. It will write the rules, and control promotions within the organization.[4]

Here's an expansion of that idea by Warren Meyer:

> Ignore the agency's stated purpose, and assume that it is being operated primarily for the benefit of its employees. One will very often find that this simple heuristic is far better at explaining agency decisions than relying on the agency's mission statement (this does not mean that there are not dedicated individuals in the agency truly, even selflessly, dedicated to the stated mission - these two notions are not at all mutually exclusive. Government agencies do not act badly because they are full of bad people, they act badly because their incentives cause good people to do stupid things).[5]

One incentive not accounted for by the Iron Law is individual self-interest The Mojave Phone Booth in no way threatened the actual desert out there, let alone the abstractions environment or even government. It might, however, have threatened the job security of a career bureaucrat. I'd have loved for a non governmental investigative body that had at least some slight chance of not being composed of white washers to look into Martin's actions regarding a certain family's small mining operation. Allowing the Booth phenomenon to continue drawing worldwide attention to her domain and to certain unilateral acts she might have committed without necessarily having the benefit of legality would clearly not have been acceptable. One obvious ass-covering option in this scenario would have been to destroy the Booth.

As much as I hate to have to think of it this way, by putting up web pages about the Cima Mine on the Booth's website and publicizing Martin's actions against them, I believe I might have drawn a signature line on the Booth's death warrant for Martin to sign her name to.

Theft of the Booth's Companion Phone Booth

In other sad telephone booth news, the phone booth in my living room, the one I had brought to the Mojave to meet the Booth, was stolen the following year, along with most of the rest of my earthly possessions, from my desert hideaway that turned out to be not quite hidden enough.

I once read that Kris Kristofferson came up with "Me and Bobby McGee" after all his stuff was stolen. He's been quoted as saying he found the theft "liberating," and I have to admit that after a while I came to feel somewhat similarly, at least until the next time I needed some of my stuff.

Before eventually denying my claim, the insurance company required an official report. I therefore reluctantly called the county sheriff's office. They even more reluctantly sent an extremely reluctant deputy named Sherwood to

make a pretense of a desultory investigation.

Deputy Sherwood's expert finding was as follows: "Yup. Somebody tore this place up." It was hard to disagree with the professional crime investigator's penetrating assessment, yet I was hoping that as long as he was there he might tell me something I didn't already know or maybe even fulfill one of the functions he might actually be qualified to perform, such as dusting for fingerprints or examining truck tracks. I had to harp on him to do even these standard tasks.

As he was leaving, I asked him to level with me. How much of a chance was there that he or any of his law enforcement cohorts would take *even a single action* in this case to enforce the law?

As it turns out, it requires not even a vowel for a public servant to provide a summary of the service one can expect in exchange for one's tax dollars. A single, vowel-less syllabic was sufficient.

"Pfffft," said Deputy Sherwood (or Deputy Sure-*Wouldn't*, as a friend later dubbed him).

The final Booth glass trade item arrived after my five-gallon bucket of Booth glass was stolen. It was the offer of a "lucky" coin, onto which the sender would stamp any message I chose. I don't know what I should have asked for, but what I did ask for was a plea to the universe regarding the thieves of all my possessions: "DELIVER THEM INTO MY HANDS."

(Many years later and still *nada*. Thanks a pant load, universe.)

What Did the NPS Do with the Mojave Phone Booth?

> Fan: You totally still have the phone booth time machine from *Bill and Ted' Excellent Adventure* in your living room, don't you?
> Keanu Reeves: I WISH! It's lost in time.
>
> - Keanu Reves, Reddit AMA ("Ask Me Anything), October 21, 2013

> Wise, like Solomon, we have converted Hue into rubble in order to save it.
>
> - Gusav Hasford, *The Short-Timers*

Despite my attempts to save not only the Booth but also its famous phone number, both were denied me. I made many calls, but Pacific Bell employees told me that phone companies never allow the re-use of retired payphone numbers.

As to the final disposition of the Booth itself, no one at the NPS would speak on the subject. Various Pacific Bell employees claimed it was their belief that the Booth had been immediately destroyed.

One almost has to admire the gall of whatever phone company PR flak was quoted as claiming, "The booth, according to Pacific Bell, will be

destroyed.

That's standard procedure, a spokesman said, for a damaged phone booth that cannot be revived." That's a pretty funny, nothing-to-see-here-folks image, if you ask me - as if the phone company swooping into a remote desert under cover of darkness in the small hours of the night to remove a "phone booth that cannot be revived" is just standard procedure, purely routine, something they did, oh, every second or third day.

What exactly was "damaged" about the Booth - that is, before phone technicians came and ripped it from its concrete pad? And why couldn't it be "revived?" It's not as though this was some inoperative, unsalvageable telephone booth.

It wasn't until 2004, when I heard from informant "Xochitl," that I learned exactly how the Booth's existence was ended.

> Date: Tue, 12 Oct 2004
> Subject: The Final fate of the Phone Booth
> Doc,
>
> Some of my relatives work for Pacific Bell/SBC in the Los Angeles area. After badgering one of them for weeks about the final fate of the famous Mojave Desert Phone Booth. I go a call today. It was confirmed that at the insistence of Mojave Preserve Rangers, the phone booth was destroyed shorty after it was hauled away from its remote location inside the Reserve. A San Bernardino Mojave SBC supervisor told my relative that as part of her job she was required to officially witness its destruction.
>
> Public phone booth numbers are never recycled.
>
> So that's the inside scoop and the final word on the phone booth from SBC/Pacific Bell.

What kind of paranoid *X-Files* scenario must *that* have looked like? Did they believe the Booth to be some sort of vampire that might rise from the dead and seek vengeance upon them? (If *only*.)

Well, if their many bombing ranges in formerly pristine desert landscapes (both in our country for practice and in other people's countries for real) didn't already tell you that bureaucrats are *very serious* about destruction, take a look at the following screenshot from the "National Symbols Cache" (believe it or not, I did not invent that) at symbols.gov:

Woodsy Owl

Destroying Old Woodsy Owl Costumes - Guidelines

1. Incinerate the complete costume with the oversight of an official USDA Forest Service law enforcement officer*.

2. The entire Woodsy Owl costume including each of the separate pieces is to be destroyed beyond recognition.

* If you do not have access to an official USDA Forest Service law enforcement representative, arrangements will be made for dealing with your costume by contacting the USDA-FS Washington Office at:

Woodsy Owl
C/o National Symbols Program
P. O. Box 96090
Washington, D. C. 20090-6090

If they're that gung-ho on destroying one of their own, just imagine how they must have treated a poor Booth they despised so much they cooked up a plot to attack and destroy it.

Destroying the Booth was a low enough thing to do, but it was extra low to do it secretly and then destroy it, knowing full well there were people who would want it - not least among them being your narrator.

A decade later, I contacted AT&T's Corporate Archivist to see if the phone company's records had any information about the Booth that could shed any light on where and how the Booth was destroyed. The archivist wrote back and said he could find no information. I made a second try.

> I'm wondering where the day-to-day operational information is kept. I know that while the booth phone was active, there was a computer record of it, with various notations by techs and so forth. What becomes of a payphone's records once it's decommissioned?

Sadly, it was still no dice from the archives.

> Regarding operational records, only a handful (around 1%) have historical value. Those materials were probably shredded, according to records retention schedules, six years after the payphone was decommissioned. They certainly are not part of my permanent Pacific Bell collection.
>
> I wish I had what you need.

I wish he had, too. I also wish I'd written years earlier. Even more do I wish I had been the one to decide what was considered to have historical value. If the operational records of a phone in a Booth that became world famous don't have "historical value," what phone's records do?

Booth Redivivus?

It happened with Hitler. It happened with Elvis. Almost immediately it happened with the Mojave Phone Booth.

I'm talking, of course, about survival myths and resurrection fantasies.

Admittedly, I sometimes found myself imagining the fallen Booth resurrecting like one of the many dying-and-rising savior-gods of old, but I never believed it would really happen. Many of the Booth's fans worldwide had much more faith than I. "Let your petitions be known," saith the Bible, and these faithful souls tried to pray the Booth back into existence by means of petitioning higher-ups. The trouble is, when the reigning higher-up is a bureaucracy rather than a merciful god, petitions are only so much vanity and striving after wind.

Still, I had to admire the impulse of my fellow Booth lovers. There are always a few who think they can administer a swift one in the nuts to a bureaucracy and I salute them. Archimedes said, "Give me where I may stand and I will move the world," but under centralized control there isn't even a place to escape notice of powerful unelected bureaucrats - not even in the middle of a desert - let alone a place from which to exert any leverage upon them.

Some people seemed to believe that bringing back the Booth would be as easy as having a friendlily, informal chat with the Superintendent of the NPS. Because throughout the world, government employees are known for being kind-hearted and open-minded? I guess?

I wasn't optimistic. Martin's "chat" with Pac Bell worked because governments wield the power of legal coercion. We don't. Most importantly, although I hoped otherwise, I suspected that Pac-Bell's claims that the Booth had been destroyed were most likely true.

Professor Steve Mann (inventor of the WearCam) wrote a short essay called "Deconnect: Deconstructing the Disconnection of the 'Disconnectivity Booth,' " in which he decried Mary Martin's decision to destroy the Booth and argued for its reestablishment on artistic and philosophical grounds.

> In addition to the alleged mandate of the Parks Service to preserve patterns of western exploration and settlement, and sites exemplifying the mining, ranching and railroad history of the old West.' one, could also argue that the Desert Phone Booth is an important artifact of postmodern culture. Perhaps in some sense the phone booth has an importance not unlike like Duchamp's urinal, or Magritte's pipe, or other common objects, taken from their usual context and re-situated as an important work of art.
>
> [...]

> Thus I would wonder why an argument cannot be made to have the phone booth restored.
>
> What would happen if the parks service decided to break intro museum storage and destroy Duchamp's urinal, or Magritte's original works? I think this phone booth has an even greater importance than paintings by now dead artists, and other such materials that are so carefully preserved, because the phone booth was an example of "living art."
>
> [...]
>
> It is my opinion that an effort should be undertaken to restore this important piece of history, culture, and (dis)connectivity, by getting the phone booth restored.

One could argue that a revived Booth would have been a different experience altogether. Resorting again to the Bible, I recall that even the disciples failed to recognize their pal Jesus in his resurrected form. Had the Booth been revived in some form watered down enough to have placated Mary Martin, our pal the Booth would have been unrecognizable to us too. As Ponyboy observed, "The Mojave Phone Booth was a huge gift, this huge, wonderful gift that none of us expected. It was uncontrived. It's not like you could say, *Well, let's go find something else like that*. You can't set out for it, you know? You can't"

The Final Cover Story:
The Self-Pumpkinification of The NPS

pumpkinifcation - an apotheosis; a parody of deification

It appears to be customary for units of the National Park Service to write these one-sided accounts called "Administrative Histories." There's even one with the comical title, *"Do Things Right the First Time": Administrative History of the National Park Service and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Acts of 1980*.

Speaking of comical titles, I've already quoted from the Mojave National Preserve's 2003 contribution to these histories, the one with the self-congratulatory tile *From Neglected Space To Protected Place: An Administrative History of Mojave National Preserve*. One supposes the tile *A Briefe and Tragikal Histore of Our Wanton and Unwanted Meddlesomenesse* just wouldn't have been quite baroque enough.

Their chosen title aptly reflects the soteriological role bureaucrats seem prone to imagine themselves playing in the cosmos. How silly to portray the great Mojave Desert as "Neglected" - as if no one loved the poor Mojave before enlightened NPS superheroes swooped in, capes a-fluttering. Like toddlers in lab experiments, they often appear to think things exist only when they are looking at them. It's certainly hard to see "neglected" as a bad thing when "protected" means *destroyed*. *History* is in this context no more than a euphemism for self-pumpkinifcation.

It strikes me as comically arrogant when teen idols who haven't yet lived even two decades commission someone to ghost-write their autobiographies.

How much more arrogant to publish an "Administrative History" of an abstraction that was then not even a decade old. Perhaps a certain beleaguered bureaucrat felt a desperate need to justify herself? It was only months after destroying the Mojave Phone Booth that Mary Martin commissioned a UNLV grad student to rewrite history from her perspective.

I learned about the project when the grad student writing it contacted me for an interview.

> They couldn't afford a real historian, but they had enough for a grad student, so they gave a grant to UNLV and UNLV picked me to write it. (I get to double-dip and use the final product as my thesis too.)
>
> So, I'm engaged in writing a history of the park's management, basically. Naturally, the phone booth saga is a small part of that story. In the document for the Park Service, I have to keep my analysis of it low-key, as they both are still a little quick to anger about the whole thing.

Unlike park management, the student was kindly disposed toward the Booth, dubbing it "the nexus of a virtual community." (In fact, years later, as a university professor, he would even be among the backers of this book's Kickstarter funding!)

> They also have final editorial control over what I write, so if they can't live with what I wrote in the first place, they'll change it, and I have to deal with that. (That's the worst part about this project, BTW.)
>
> Anyway, so my analysis of the booth in that context will be largely narrative - how it came to be a phenom, what the park service did, and so on. Neutral language, all that shit.

My response was, "There goes any chance of recording what truly happened." The writer agreed.

> Exactly. That's why I want to set the record straight in my other papers, which the park service has no control over. For the park service document, I will present both sides like park personnel say that ... but booth users claim ... "and leave it at that, so an intelligent reader can have a shot at the truth. Who knows if it will make it through the editorial revisions, but I should at least try.

I told him I hoped that if I declined to take part, he would not construe it as ill-will toward him personally.

> I appreciate that. I know basically where you are coming from, but I hope you understand that I'd really like to get the actual story out there - writing an account of the incident that the NPS can change seems bogus, but that's what I'm stuck with. The outside papers are my way of hopefully presenting a better analysis, and in some sense atoning for the sins of administrative history.

To me it was a fatal flaw that the NPS version would almost certainly represent Mary Martin's viewpoint rather than his, but the writer tried one final time to convince me.

> Just please keep in mind that the ultimate story will be poorer without your participation. It's not like the NPS is going to hunt you down and dispatch you with extreme prejudice if I interview you. :)
>
> Ultimately, I just don't think I could write the story of the booth in a balanced way without talking to you.

Obviously I liked the writer and understood the situation he was in and wanted to help him. Having come of age during the Nixon administration, however, I knew better than to participate in a cover-up. And I've never understood that movie trope where people dig their own graves at gunpoint. I say, if they're gonna shoot you anyway, let 'em dig the damned hole themselves. With Martin's fingers in the pie, I couldn't see how my participation in the effort would benefit either me, the Booth, or the truth.

In the end, Martin had her say and now, with this book, I've had mine.

NOTES

1 A 1990 Los Angeles Times article gives an idea of the paucity of the communications available in be area a the time and what's at stake in desolate places. Pacific Bell wasn't willing to offer telephone service to the community themselves, yet fought the attempts of another company willing to do so, possibly costing the life of at least one desert resident.

For 30 years cattle rancher Bob Ausmus fought to bring basic telephone servicre to his hometown of Cima (pop. 20) and neighboring outposts in the distant eastern corner of San Bernardino County.

Living without a phone, Ausmus argued, was not only inconvenient but dangerous, leaving the widely scattered' residents of the eastern Mojave Desert without a way to summon help in the event of a rattlesnake bite, car accident or other emergency.

Last week, Ausmus proved his point with chilling clarity. The descendant of Mojave Desert homesteaders died of a heart attack at his general store, alone and 30 miles from the nearest telephone. He twas 69.

"If he had had a phone, I can't help but think he might be alive today," sail]. Clayton Brown, a lifelong friend of Ausmus who owns a ranch in nearby Pinto Valley. "At least he would have had a fighting chance."

[. ..]

Pacific Bell officials told Ausmus that providing service to the remote region would be too costly and too complicated, but the feisty cattleman didn't give up. Last year, he found a savior in Ponnderosa Telephone Co., a small, Fresno County utility.

Planning to use new technology that sends comumunications via transmission towers erected en mountaintops, Ponderosa pledged to provide the 400 desert dwellers with basic telephone service for $17.85 a month.

Pacific Bell has formally protested the plan.

2 The song is about a different Mary Martin but is followed on the album by a song with the contextually interesting tide, "Breakin' the Law."

3 http://deserttripper.99k.org/mmletter.html

4 http://jerrypourelle.com/reports/jerryp/iron.html

5 www.coyoteblog.com/coyote_blog/2013/04/government-prioritization-fail-adding-staff-when-it-is-least-essential.html

AFTERMATH

Lost, lost, lost in this world / And I can't quite
figure it out
Lost, lost, lost in this world I And I don't know
what it's about

- The Hatfields, "Lost In This World"

In early June, 2000, Nicholas von Robison - luthier, former Hatfields member, and inadvertent originator of the worldwide phenomenon that was the Mojave Phone Booth - took his own life. Nick had outlived the Booth by only a few weeks.

His former partner in the Musical Instrument Makers Forum had this to say:

> I'm sorry to tell you that Nick committed suicide in June of 2000 at his home in California. He and I had not communicated for about two years at that time due to the increasing emotional instability that prompted him to end the business partnership we had formed to get the Musical Instrument Makers Forum online. His death was a big loss to the instrument making community as he was one of the world's foremost experts on wood identification as it relates to musical instrument construction.

Nick had seemed so contrite regarding his having lied about the Booth that when I heard of his death, I hoped that hadn't been a factor. Bon von Wheelie assured me that the two events were unconnected.

> He had so many other things going on. The guy had problems, you know? And the thing was, be was really great. We just had a blast with him. He was so funny. He had that real sarcastic sense of humor that I love, just really funny, and great to the Luthiers Guild.
>
> There's a lot of open, loose ends, there, on him. I don't think we'll ever know, with him. He

was the type of guy where you could know him well and not really know him at all. He let you be friends with a certain part of him and you were lucky to get that.

When somebody kills themselves you always feel like there's something you could have done to prevent it but with Nick I don't think it was possible.

The Luthiers Guild posted a remembrance of Nick.

How well I remember the first letter we got from Nick. He told of being introduced at a party as a Master Craftsman." At first he was flattered, but was quickly brought back to reality when the local birdhouse tinkerer was also identified as a "Master Craftsman."

And remember the big hoo-ha about the Mojave Phone Booth a year or two ago? Nick was the discoverer of the Mojave Phone Booth. It's a long story. but a well-documented one.

His academic and practical knowledge of botany and wood anatomy was particularly valuable.

I asked Bon whether she believed Nick really had ever gone out to visit the Booth.

We said the same thing, "Well, god, I wonder if the Phone Booth thing was real?" Because he was one of these guys, he was leading a double life or something. But I'm pretty sure he did go out there. He would hike. He used to send us pictures. He tried to hike that whole west coast trail. I know he hiked that, because he sent us pictures of that. So I wouldn't be surprised if he went out [to the Booth]. I'm sure he did at least that part.

The following excerpt is from a story called "Floyd" that Nick wrote and posted to his (now defunct} website:

A few minutes later I was back on 395, moving up through the gears to cruising speed. I pondered the notion that aloneness, or isolation, was probably an underrated state of being. It builds self-reliance, dignity, and a kind of off-center clarity about the world that can't be developed by consensus, political correctness, or subscription to the crowd. I was about to shift into fifth gear when I caught my reflection in the glow of the dash lights on the windshield. I saw I had been grinning, thinking about Floyd.

"Sheeet," I whispered to myself.

I slammed the shift home and drove into the velvety darkness of the desert with Betelgeuse in Orion as my beacon.

Presumptions of Guilt

Decidedly we are all living engines
of destruction and we might just as
well admit it

- Paul Griswold Howes,*The Giant Cactus Forest and Its World*

I still sometimes hear from people with all kinds of suggestions of how I should have handled this, that, or the other during the Booth phenomenon.

After a 2014 Snap Judgment radio episode featuring the Booth story aired, the Booth's book website received the following comment from a self-described "educator":

wish you'd left the booth alone. you don't have to exploit a thing-anything or everything-just

Maybe the educator (who is American herself, of course) didn't listen to the whole story or maybe she simply failed to understand what she heard. But her snap judgment about me reminded me of similarly ill informed wet blanket newspaper columnists in 2000 who harshly blamed me for the Booth's destruction, rather than blame the government employees who schemed to have the Booth destroyed (whom the columnists seemed to view, not coincidentally, as the employees no doubt viewed themselves.).

Columnists get paid to fill column inches opining about events. Some of them evidently don't bother to find out any of the facts relating to them first.

One of these professional hecklers was a sportswriter who specializes in treacly sports-related human interest stories and even more treacly inspirational best-sellers about death and heaven and so forth. I suppose it could be seen as flattering that he would take time out from his busy schedule of writing literature designed to appeal to viewers of Lifetime Channel movies just to criticize me for writing on the Internet about a Phone Booth.

"Internet junkies" wrote the columnist - so you already know where he's headed with this - "called up the lonely phone booth Web site" (they called up a website?), "and they chatted and fussed and dialed the number incessantly. And when someone would answer, they'd say important things like: 'Hi! Who's this?" One wonders what the columnist says when he answers the telephone.

It almost seemed as if he had merely plagiarized the snide comments of the UCLA sociology professor I quoted earlier. Just as one would have expected a sociologist to find something of interest in the Booth phenomenon, so might one have expected a writer of inspirational best-sellers to have been able to draw inspiration from it.

Instead, lacking any knowledge or understanding of any of the events that led to a government employee decreeing the destruction of the Booth, the columnist confidently repeated the claim made by that same government employee that there was "so much disturbance of the natural environment ... that the National Park Service folks said, 'Enough.'"

(Oh, those long-suffering servants of the public! How long shall they bear with the benighted members of their public?)

In response, *Route 66* magazine wrote that the columnist had "obviously never visited the phone booth, but he decided to write about it anyway. We were there in early April for an article in our fall issue. There was no 'environmental disturbance'; in fact, we were impressed by how clean the area was," adding, "the death of the phone booth was not because of the Internet but because of the National Park Service, whose motto is 'Visit your parks."

Some columnists aren't about to let facts get in the way of a jeremiad. "We're becoming a lazy planet chock-full of voyeurs," thundered the guy who made a career out of opining about spectator sports, "so ready to live vicariously that a phone booth that served almost no one was destroyed by

overindulgence."

No. The Booth was not destroyed by overindulgence. It was destroyed by a cabal of government employees, which a minimum of research would have told him. But I guess one shouldn't expect the kind of writing that fills no other need than the need to fill space to be any deeper than a birdbath.

Complaining about the supposed loss of quiet places - one wonders whether the guy has any idea how much desert there really is - the inspirational writer wrote, "Personally, I like the idea of disappearing."

As it happens, there seem to be some who endorse the idea of your book's disappearing.

> Rory: Do you know how long it would take me to read 13 million books?
> Lorelei: But honey, you don't have to read every one of them. *Tuesdays with Morrie?* Skip that.
> - *The Gilmore Girls*

> I have a friend who's been diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (AlS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease), and for a while now we've been planning to have a *Tuesdays with Morrie* bonfire. We've both received many copies of the book, and frankly, it stinks.
> - Karn Duffy, *Model Patient: My Life As as Incurable Wise-Ass*

Some Washington, D.C. columnist of similar ilk who claimed to have visited the Booth could still somehow dismissively claim, "I wish I could remember the actual phone booth itself, but it was so long ago and California was so full of phone booths" - as if there were lots of phone booths standing all alone out in deserts. Not surprisingly, his understanding was no better than his memory. He blamed the Internet, of course, and - again, of course - dutifully parroted the NPS's claims of the ecological burden of visitors, portraying government employees as heroic protectors. The National Park Service - wisely sensing a counterculture landmark-gone-awry situation, a Jim Morison's grave thing - had it removed." To this sort of columnist, whatever bureaucrats decide to do is wise but then I suppose that's how one gets ahead in "Washington, D.C. "By then, the booth's windows were all gone. It had bullet holes." Anyone who bothered to acquire the slightest familiarity with the story would know that the Booth's bullet holes and busted-out glass dated from long before I ever heard of it, let alone the rest of the world. As ever with such professional opiners as this, ignorance is never enough to stop their fingers from wagging.

> Not every moment of elusive joy, not every small and beguilingly quirky thing, not every secret place, not every last bit of anything that's kinda cool needs to be mentioned in public.

Pretty funny, coming from someone whose job description seems to have required him only to blather publicly and lay blame, and that without regard to facts.

Happily, most newspaper writers, even those who repeated the "environment" lie in the NPS's press release, were less inclined to shovel hot coals onto my head. James Hibberd was better placed than most reporters or

columnists to understand the Booth's demise, having performed actual reportorial work by open-mindedly journeying to the Booth, enduring the blizzard to experience the Booth and observe us.

> In retrospect, Daniels was perhaps attempting an infeasible balancing act to share this booth - something quirkily beautiful and uniquely cool - with like-minded individuals while protecting it from becoming co-opted by mainstream culture. He succeeded for a while. But then, last year, the booth became the new It icon. There were copycat Web sites, counties, news stories and even recent references in US West and 1-800-COLLECT commercials. Daniels says he knew the booth was too good to last. "I'm actually kind of mixed about it," he says. "I never meant to start an avalanche of people trooping out there, but I do think people had a right to be there. I talked to the Pac Bell spokesman and he kept quoting the "negative environmental impact' phrase from the press release. And I kept saying, "What negative impact specifically?' and he couldn't tell me. [Visitors are) traveling on an established road."

The Comedy Central TV show *Tosh.O* offers people who screw up on the Internet a chance at a "Web Redemption." With the Booth destroyed, I guess my chance at redemption is slim (although I wouldn't want to bet on the chances of the government employees who destroyed it).

People sometimes ask me what I'd do if I found out about something else similar to the Booth. I used to say that I would probably keep quiet about it. That might seem in retrospect to be a wise policy. Those who spend time in remote places sees evidence that the will to destroy is a besetting sin of humanity.

> Some of the caves apparently had never been explored because we found several Indian metates still in place, just as they had been left by the long dead occupants. We didn't disturb those metates, although they are greatly prized as relics and souvenirs by many a desert traveler. We thought they looked better where they were than on someone's patio, and we received such a thrill from entering a cave knowing that no souvenir hunters had been there before us, that we wanted to leave it as we found it.
>
> Sometime later I wrote up the trip in a magazine and illustrated the article with photographs. Some of the smart readers, recognizing the contours of some of the mountains, managed to find where we had been camped and retraced our steps. A short time ago when I returned to show some companions caves that had never been looted, we found all the metates had been taken and all the dirt removed from the floors of the cave and sifted for Indian arrowheads and other souvenirs.
>
> Such is life.
>
> - Erle Stanley Gardner, *The Desert is Yours* (1963)

Speaking about another desert place, a commenter on a Death Valley message board wrote:

> I agree with Slim. Keep [redacted] a mystery so it doesn't go the way of the Mojave Phone Booth. Let the reward of discovery go to those who worked to find it.

Professor Cardyhouse advised, "The next cool thing you find needs to be password-protected." In *Reopening the Mojave Road*, Dennis Casebier wrote, "A prevalent mentality at the time suggested that if there was something interesting or fun on the desert, you should be secretive about it. You shouldn't tell anyone where it was because if you did, the vandals would come and destroy it. For a while I bought into that."

Indeed, there are other ways of looking at it, such as that of the late urban explorer Ninjalicious.

> Some magicians claim that good magicians never share their tricks. This is nonsense. Those who don't share can spend their lives feeling very proud of their five or six selfishly hoarded secrets, but those who do share will be shared with and will come out far ahead. Sharing a hint or two - or, even better, a warning or two - about a particular area or building with other explorers either online or in print is great, but please don't give away specific entrances or access points except perhaps to illustrate a general principle. Most explorers enjoy the challenge of finding a place and figuring out their own way in and don't like too much handholding. (Those who want step-by step directions are the ones to watch out for.)
>
> *- Access All Areas*

Maybe from the start I should have done as Ninjalicious suggested with Mojave Phone Booth seekers. Sure, it's possible that someone might have gotten lost - or worse - but by initially giving directions, it's possible that I made misadventure more likely, rather than less. And anyway, isn't danger often an indispensable part of adventure?

Booth pal Wig told me, "I'm glad that you adopted the Booth." I said I was glad I did, but at the same time, if I hadn't, it might still be there, she said, "I don't know. Maybe. It's hard to say. I wouldn't take that on."

Her words reminded me of one of the best pieces of advice I ever received. Long ago, during a difficult period in my life, my good friend Lisa, judging that I was being too tough on myself, gently urged me, "Give yourself a break." Simple, yet profound enough that it helped change my life.

Besides, as John Lydon once sagely observed, "There is something beautiful about creating a fiasco." So after many years I've come around to trying to see the Booth phenomenon warts and all.

A World Without the Booth

> People often speak of the heigts of fame, but only the famous can tell of its depths.
>
> - Waylon Nash

Maps featuring the Mojave Desert no longer include a tiny dot with the word TELEPHONE next to it where no telephone could reasonably be expected.

Even the Booth's number was erased - "permanently retired," as the phone company euphemized it - and three successive iterations of the phone company, Pacific Bell, SBC, and AT&T, refused in turn even to consider releasing it to me. One has to assume that the destruction of the Booth's number was almost certainly, like the destruction of the Booth itself, part of the "agreement" forced upon the phone company by the NPS.

More than one Mojave visitor reported to me that they were told by NPS rangers that the Mojave Phone Booth's destruction was entirely the phone

company's doing, that the government had nothing at all to do with it. As ever, the conquerors write the official fictions that come co be called "history." I've been told that some NPS employees in the Mojave even tried co claim they'd never heard of the Mojave Phone Booth.

> BLM has urged us not to use the name "Zzyzx" for this spot, but rather to use Soda Springs" almost exclusively. Their rationale is that Soda Springs is the older name. Their motivation is that they're trying to erase the memory of Dr. Springer.
>
> - Dennis Casebier and the Friends of the Mojave Road, *Mojave Road Guide*

Since the destruction of the Booth, however, there seems to have occurred some degree of change in the Mojave fiefdom. In 2008, Andrea sent me an article from a 2008 issue of *Dirt Bike* magazine.

> "It turned out that riding here is sill possible" said Scot Harden.[...] But I was kind of lucky. If the last administrator was still in charge, I wouldn't have stood a chance." The original administration controlling the Preserve was apparently anti-dirt-bike, anti-recreation, anti-access and anti-people. Scot told the story of the Mojave Phone Booth. [...] The last administrator had it removed, considering it an unwelcome attraction that generated too many visitors. "She eventually was removed from the post." said Harden. "Now the Preserve has management that's willing to work with people."

Maybe from botching the Booth situation the bureaucrats learned the simple lesson to be "willing to work with people" (an innovative idea one might suppose would have been a given for "servants of the people"). At any rate, it's impossible to imagine anything like the following 2015 Tweet emanating from the Mojave National Preserve during Martin's tenure:

Mojave Phone Booth
@MojaveFoneBooth
The NPS now wants people driving Aiken Mine Rd? 15 years ago the NPS destroyed the Mojave Phone Booth to prevent it.
Mojave National Pres @MojavePres
The Aiken Mine Road is a great 4x4 road to experience in the park. Enter off of Kelbaker Road. Bring water & map.

Had a different supervisor been overseeing the NPS presence in the Mojave at the turn of the century, maybe the booth could still be standing there today.

I noticed not long ago that the Mojave Phone Booth was #19 on

Wikipedia's List of "Unusual Articles." In reference to the list, an exchange on the Internet discussion site MetaFilter went as follows:

> **Commenter 1:** The one about the Mojave phone booth makes me sort of sad.
> **Commenter 2:** The "Mojave phone booth phenomenon" would be a name for the feeling one gets on seeing content destroyed on Wikipedia. As in, "That article was cool, until it got Mojave'd."

It would be appropriate if *Mojave'd* became a synonym for conceptual erasure, given the National Park Service's many attempts to memory hole the Booth. In 2009, Waxy.org's Andy Baio had "this silly idea to isolate the backgrounds from famous Internet memes, removing all the subjects from every photo or video." That was nine years after the NPS basically invented that game, as documented in Lara Hartley's widely circulated photo of the empty patch of desert where the Booth had stood. Not long ago, my friend Britain posted online a photo of the Booth along with a parody of Don McLean's American Pie":

> A long, long time ago, I can still remember
> how there was a phone booth in the middle of the Mojave Desert.
> And I knew if I had my chance, I would visit it and call work from it,
> since they had an 800 number at my work.
>
> A late August night made me shiver,
> between the so-called "roads" and the surprisingly cold weather.
> Good news at the road's end, I met a couple of new friends.
> I vaguely remember weeping inside when I read that SBC declined to keep it open in the face of growing wireless coverage,
> the day the phone booth died.

I couldn't resist adding a chorus:

> So bye bye, poor Mojave Phone!
> You'd be safe out in the desert
> 'cept it's Federally owned
> Them Park Service dorks were thinkin' up lots of lies,
> Singin', "This'ss be the day the Booth dies!
> This'll be the day the Booth dies!"

Even so, almost twenty years after the government's destruction of the Booth, the Booth's idea continues to live on as an idea.

Continuing Inspiration of the Booth

> You can break a man's skull, you can arrest him, you can throw him into a dungeon, but how do you control what's up here? How do you fight an idea - especially a new idea?
>
> - Sextus, *Ben-Hur*

Infants up to a certain age lack *object permanence* - that is, they believe that when they can no longer see an object, it has ceased to exist. The NPS superintendent in the Mojave seems to have believed she could destroy the Booth by making the Booth disappear. Draw whatever developmental conclusions you will from that.

Thankfully, ideas, as someone has remarked, are bulletproof. Indeed, throughout history, many have believed not in literal immortality but rather in the immortality of influence, in which one is understood to live on after one's death in the memories and effects of one's ideas and acts. In this sense, the Booth could live on, if not eternally, then at least indefinitely.

> After you hang around the net long enough, eventually you hear about the Mojave Phone Boom. If you haven't yet, *this* is your time.
>
> A stunning demonstration of the potential constructive use of too much time on one's hands. One day, I too shall do something this cool.
>
> But if you have heard of it, the sad news is that the Booth has been removed.
>
> Admittedly, that was two years ago. If you're way ahead of me on that, too, then I'll just thank you not to mock too loudly.
>
> The other day, Keri was asking me why I put this site back up. One part of the answer is this: I seriously do want to do something as cool as the Phone Booth Project someday. It seems to me that, as log as anything, getting there requires some self-indoctrination in habits of thought, starting with: publish, dammit. There's nifty ideas out there all the time, if you just pay attention and do something about them.
>
> - gungeralv.org (now defunct)

> My name is Rory. I read this article, "The Last Phone Booth In New York City." and immediately thought of the Mojave Phone Booth. I can't properly explain why, but your site means a lot to me. I'm from Milwaukee and have visited the Mojave Desert only once, a few years after the booth was dismantled. Sill, for some reason, I get all warm and fuzzy recalling the details of excursions I wasn't on to a place I've never been. I solemnly vow not only to visit the gravesite of the Mojave Phone Booth, but also to walk down West End Avenue in New York and visit the remaining phone booths in America's largest city, I will be sure to leave some meaningful record of my presence at the former, whenever it is I am able to make the pilgrimage. A decade later, your curiosity and subsequent custodial relationship with this beautiful former anti-landmark enrich people's lives! Thanks for it

I'd have been happy enough if the Booth had lived on in a purely Urban Dictionary fashion, as when some Internet wiseacre remarked that "Mojave Phone Booth sounds like a code name for something you do to the first person who passes out at a party." But the idea has proven far more durable than that.

As one might expect, it is in the arts that the Booth has been especially influential. In 2006, for example, the Booth inspired a spectacularly colorful art installation on a bridge over the Seine in Paris. Designed by controversial architect Frank Gehry in collaboration with French artist Sophie Calle, the installation features a telephone with a receiver but no dial. On the phone is a plaque that says,

> My name is Sophie Calle
> You are in my phone booth
> I am the only one who knows its number
> I will dial it every now and then, at my leisure,
> hoping to reach someone at the end

It goes without saying that some conversations might be recorded, for my exclusive use

From the French edition of Wikipedia:

> Concerning the genesis of this idea, Sophie Calle explains that she had it after "having read an article on a phone booth which was in the desert, which had been left there following work. Perhaps a year later, somebody saw that it always functioned. And it became a place where people would go to await phone calls from who knows where." This booth does exist in the United States, in the Mojave Desert; it is known by the name Mojave Phone Booth. The website hosting the project at the origin of the popularity of this phone booth also echoed the work of Calle.

Calle's Booth project in turn inspired a project of Gehry's:

> In 2006, one of the world's most celebrated architects, Frank Gehry, created a giant flower sculpture, "Le Telephone", for the French artist, Sophie Calle to use in an imaginative art happening on the Pont de Gagliano in Paris. Today, inspired by the colors of that sculpture, Heller is producing the Gehry Color Cubes.

Someone whose name I have unfortunately misplaced once sent me a short play he wrote called *Mojave Telephone Booth*. One line I especially liked was, "You don't glimpse little bits of pattern now and again? Little patches of what seem to hint at some larger cohesion in the universe?"

As possibly one of these very hints, a similar theme also appeared in John Putch's fine independent feature film *Mojave Phone Booth.* I almost retitled this book after I read the succinct description of Putch's film by an eBay seller: "DESERT PAYPHONE KEEPS RINGING." An Amazon customer reviewed the film as follows: "My curiosity in the film is based on an interest in the eccentric things that people do in dry places," which isn't bad as a summary of the Booth project itself. It's probably not easy to make a movie about a meme. Well, someone did make a movie about Mahir "I Kiss You!" Cagri (except for some reason they called it *Borat*). I was glad Putch's film

was merely inspired by the Booth instead of being explicitly about actual events of the Booth phenomenon itself.

Only a few months ago as I write this (in 2018), Cambridge University staged "a play which documents the story of your discovery of the phone booth onstage," a "multi media production using clippings from the web, live action shadow puppetry and a live mixed score."

A number of musicians and bands have written songs called "Mojave Phone Booth," at least two bands have even taken the name Mojave Phone Booth, and the 2014 song "Brother Ray" by the great Pere Ubu might refer to the Mojave Phone Booth, although I can't prove it.

> Next thing, I get a phone call
> He says he's calling from a phone booth out in the desert.
> I want to climb up Soda Mountain
> I want to live on the Soda Mountain

Given that Soda Mountain is not far from the spot where the Booth stood, though, I'd take that bet.

Because the Booth was originally a personal project, I especially love to hear about it anytime it inspires other projects. By means of a South Park trope, Pale.org suggested a Mojave Phone Booth inspired project:

> Oh my god! You killed the Mojave Desert phone booth! You bastards! Thought for a project: in my travels compile a list of really, really remote phone booths, preferably with a latitude/ longitude. Post the numbers to a web site. Might even be worth getting a GPS for .. hey, anyone want to help me out with this? If you know an isolated booth, mail me the number and lat/long (if you can).

I don't know if that project came to fruition, but five years later Professor Cardyhouse initiated a similar project (now defunct) called Phoneswarm. The Professor explained it in the Phoneswarm FAQ;

> When I was a young whelp, I would pass a payphone on the way to school. Sometimes, this payphone happened to ring, and, given an excuse to delay my education, I would always answer it. The conversations were confusing, strange, lewd, banal, wonderful.
>
> Years later, a friend and I drove to a phone booth in the middle of the desert that he had been calling for weeks, listening to it ring. I didn't get it. Eventually, it sunk in, and I visited the booth, a few more times during its rise to world-wide superstardom before the NFS ripped it out and destroyed it.
>
> "So,"I thought, years ago, how about something like a "phone booth of the [undetermined length of time)," the number changes, people call it, people hang out at the phone itself and take calls, people submit numbers and photos, etc. Of course, someone else had already done that awhile ago. But he gave it up, and wished me luck.

In 2009 a marketing outfit called Viral Factory tried to drum up buzz for Skype by recreating a Mojave Phone Booth-style experience in Spain.

> In an attempt to raise awareness of Skype's cheaper international calls to landlines and mobile phones. The Viral Factory has sent trilingual actor Rob Cavazos, aka Wilderness Man, on a ten day camping trip next to the "most remote phone box in the world," where he'll be taking calls from all over the globe. Visitors to the site can ring him up through Skype (or through any phone service) and watch/hear their conversation live.

> The project was inspired by The Mojave Phone Booth, a public phone in the middle of be Mojave Desert, sixteen miles from the nearest highway. A huge following of people made pilgrimages to the phone to make a call, or called it randomly, to see if someone would answer.
>
> *- Advertising Age*

It's funny to think that back when the Booth went viral we didn't yet even use the word viral about popular things, and now there are entire corporations devoted to making things "go viral."

Viewed as a virus, telephonic projects seemed to sprout everywhere after the Booth. I'm not claiming they were explicitly inspired by the Booth, of course, but they were consonant with is spirit. For exmple, a project appeared in 2007 that reminded me, thematically, of the title of the poetry book (whose cover featured a photo of me fleeing from the camera during our Blizzard at the Booth) *The Singing of the Ice.*

> With the help of sponsors, Virgin Mobile and Dolphinear, Katie Paterson was able to drop a hydrophone into the icy lagoon where the glacier is disappearing and pick up the sounds.
>
> The waterproof microphone is linked to a phone and amplifier housed in a tent on land.
>
> The work, entitled "Vatnajokull (the sound of)," will continue until June 13.
>
> Only one caller at a time can get through, which was deliberate so people can have a one-to-one beautiful and intimate moment" with the glacier, she said.

Another interesting telephonic project appeared the following year.

> Call [*number redacted*] to have your voice blasted into the luscious lands of Norway. Telemegaphone Dale is a 23-foot-tall wind-powered loudspeaker sculpture that picks up incoming calls and projects them into the nearby surroundings. This Telemegphone, created by the Swedish designers at Unswom Industries. is located on a mountain overlooking the village of Dalsfjord in Western Norway. Apparently, a massive" amount of people have been calling. The sculpture is only "available" when the wind is blowing and the line isn't busy.

References to the Booth show up regularly in books. Sometimes they're academic or scholarly works. Sometimes they're "wackity-woo" types of books (*505 Unbelievably Stupid Webpages; The Ultimate Book of World Lists: Tke Best and the Worst of Our Time; Beyond Bizarre; The United States of Strange*). Sometimes it's hard to tell those two genres apart. But there's no telling where it'll pop up, from the *International California Mining Journal*, to a Sunday School lesson book, or even at the beginning of *The Overton Window*, a novel written by (or at any rate appearing under the name on political pundit Glenn Beck. In a similar vein (or not, depending upon what one thinks of politics), here's a Booth mention from a book about astrology:

> A nest of Scorpions contains at least one family member who is on drugs, in jail, or a guest of the psycho ward, as well as various afflicted fiends and relatives who show up at all hours of the day and night or call for help from the last telephone booth in the Mojave Desert.
>
> *- Born on a Rotten Day: Illuminating and Coping with the Dark Side of the Zodiac*

So now we know what seems nutty to someone who believes in astrology.

Probably my favorite Booth book appearances so far have been the ones in two different grade school reading primers, with cute little illustrations of the

Booth and recountings of the Booth tale (with some elasticity as to veracity of detail) and questions for pupils to answer afterward.

> How did Godfrey Daniels publicize the Mojave Phone Booth?
>
> Do you think the National Park Service and Pacific Bell made the right decision to remove the phone booth? Explain.
>
> What happens if someone calls the phone booth today?
>
> Write **S** if the possessive word is singular. Write **P** if it is plural.
> _Godfrey Daniels's interest

I maybe should have borrowed the following format for my chapter about the NPS's press release:

> Write **T** before the sentences that are true. Write **F** before the sentences that are false.
> Godfrey Daniels posted the number of the booth on the Internet.
> _The phone booth is still in working order today.

After receiving a copy of the primer in the mail I was complaining to Professor Cardyhouse about the primer's reliance on the NPS press release, saying such things as, "They felt that it was their responsibility." Cardyhouse uncharacteristically took a far cheerier view of it.

> But this is SO FUCKING AWESOME
> Do you know how many little minds will be
> BLOWN AWAY by this?
> This is fucking GREAT
> People will come up to you when you're 75 and say
> "I read about you"

And he's right. That is pretty darned great. My pal Robb had a similar response.

> WOW! That is so ... I don't know what it is. You're, like, mini-legendary or something. In 20 years, somebody is going to be getting high with his buddies in college and talking about how when they were in grade school they read about this dude who found this phone booth out in the desert and, like, used to call it and shit/
> God *damn*!" his friends will say.
> "No, *Godfrey Daniel,*" he will reply.

I'll say this, in terms of story, the Mojave Phone Booth sure beats "See Spot run" all to hell.

The Booth is all over the Internet, of course, even though nearly all of the copycat Booth sites proved to be fair-weather sites. Some people are desert rats, others are deserter rats, I guess. The original Mojave Phone Booth website lives on of course ("in all its glory," as *Snap Judgment* radio host Glynn Washington cracked) at DeuceOfClubs.com, and will live at least as long as I do.

Recently the Booth has been resurrected in a ghostly son of way by means

of its original phone number. As I mentioned, in previous years I had been repeatedly told by Pacific Bell, SBC, and AT&T that the Booth's number would never be made available to me, and was "permanently retired." On July 31, 2013, however - as I was revising the above paragraph, oddly enough - I received a message from phone phreak Lucky225, letting me know that he had acquired the number 760-733-9969. Currently the number serves as a sort of telephonic chat room. Its acquisition demonstrated yet again that, whatever shenanigans end up resulting by means of that familiar old phone number, many years after its demise, the idea of the Mojave Phone Booth retains its ability to surprise.

> Subject: Mojave Phone Booth-inspired thought
> From: David M
> As I read the Mojave Phone Booth saga to the point where vandals struck, I suddenly remembered something that happened one morning riding the Blue Line subway to Boston. I found a balloon in my pocket, so I blew it up and set it loose in the crowded rush hour subway car. For a good 5 minutes, everyone on the car was smiling, batting it around and engaging in light conversation with others. When it landed in front of one woman, she suddenly grabbed it and stuffed it into the huge shopping bag she had in front of her.
> We all just sort of shrank back into our workday faces, but hey, we still have that moment. Even weeks later I would occasionally catch the gaze of a familiar face from that morning, and a faint glimmer would pass between us.
> Thanks for giving me one more of those moments with your little saga. They really do add up.

As much as the NPS tried to stuff the Booth into their bag, people still go out to visit the place where it once stood. Geocaching.com, for example, has featured many narratives of people who have done it. Apparently this still rankles government employees.

> Important note: This is a VIRTUAL cache - you will not find a log book or trinkets at the given latitude and longitude. The National Park Service has said that they do no want caches located in parks and until they change their policy, it's pointless to place a physical cache here; it would just disappear in the night he way the phone booth did. Someone has even taken a hatchet and chopped half-way through the telephone pole.

I've been out to the Booth site a couple of times myself, including a very special visit in November of 2017 with Daniel and Ponyboy to observe the 20th anniversary of our 1997 Booth road rip. This time, three vehicles were involved at various stages of our desert wanderings. No automotive issues were experienced.

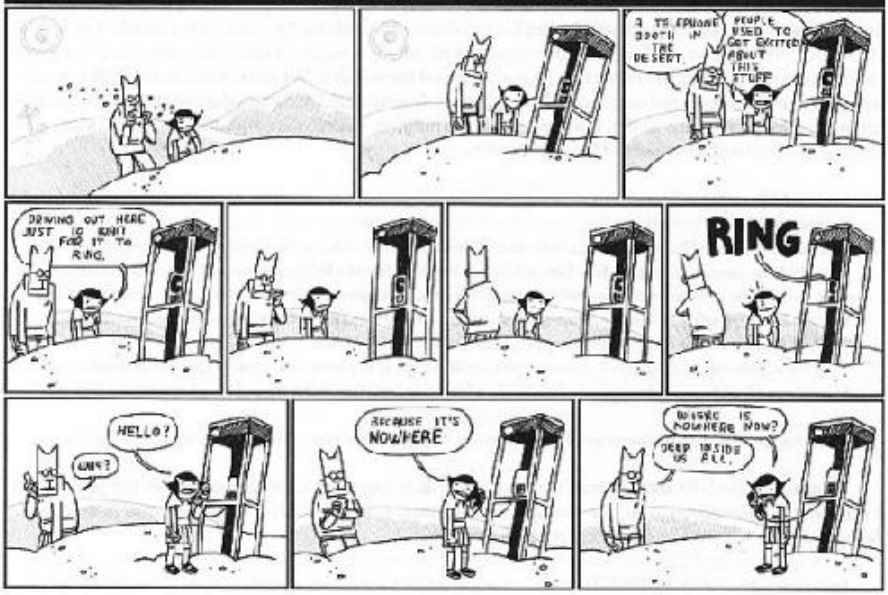
In 2015, a phone booth in Prairie Grove, Arkansas became the first phone booth ever to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This phone booth was never famous or of special note in any way but was nominated because it is "an 'excellent example' of the aluminum-and-glass phone booths that were developed for Bell Telephone System." According to Arkansas Online, The phone booth is a tourist attraction" and "people often stop at the

booth to take pictures." It's remarkable that a phone booth made it onto The National Register of Historic Places, given that inclusion on the list is at the discretion of none other than our old pals at the NPS.

The article notes in passing that "The National Park Service had reservations about putting a phone booth on the list."

Oh, I can believe that, all right. Can I *ever*!

Miracle Workers


A TELEPHONE BOOTH IN THE DESERT.
PEOPLE USED TO GET EXCITED ABOUT THIS STUFF
DRIVING OUT HERE JUST TO WAIT FOR IT TO RING.
RING
HELLO?
UHH?
BECAUSE IT'S NOWHERE
WHERE IS NOWHERE NOW?
DEEP INSIDE US ALL.

WHY A BOOTH?

> Things can drag on if you don't have a target date.
>
> - Earl Warren, addressing the Warren Commission

> Hofstadter's Law: It always takes longer than you expect, even if you take into account Hofstadter's Law.
>
> - Douglas Hofstadter

Well. I have now written an entire book about a phone booth.

It took me more than a decade to do it, which is pretty ridiculous, really. "A book is a postponed suicide," said E. M. Cioran. If so, the years I spent writing this book might be as close as I'll ever get to eternal life. It sure felt eternal some days.

> A work is finished when we can no longer improve it, though we know it to be inadequate and incomplete. What determines the degree to which a work is done is not a requirement of art or of truth, it is exhaustion and, even more, disgust.
>
> - E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble With Being Being My Born*

My own disgust mostly stems from having taken all this time just to write a book about a phone booth. For you the news is good, however, in that this book can in a sense legitimately be called a phone book. Read just a few pages more and you'll be able to win bar bets by claiming in all honesty to have read an entire phone book. You're welcome!

For my part, I can finally get on with my life and pursue different projects. Maybe make a remote outhouse famous? A remote drinking fountain? A remote traffic signal?

> The trouble with super heroes is what co do between phone booths.
>
> - Ken Kesey

After the destruction of the Booth, I really did consider putting up a website about that goofy stop sign next to where the Booth had stood. The Mojave Stop Sign, I'd have called it, in parody of myself, my projects, and the unimaginative names I give them.

But you and I know the stop sign would have been removed almost instantly by the NPS.

In fact they did remove it anyway, without my involvement, presumably at the same time they exhumed and carried off the cattle guard that was buried beside it.

I have my little projects, government employees have theirs, I suppose.

> Published in November, 1880, [Be-Hur] sold millions of copies over the years and was printed in 21 languages. The book spawned all sorts of Ben-Hur merchandise, from bicycles to baking powder, not to mention a movie or two. Lew [Wallace] looked at his wife and said, "My God, did I set all of this in motion?"
>
> - Bob Boze Bell,
> *The Illustrated Life and Times of Billy the Kid*

Regarding the Booth project I have often been asked *Why?* Sometimes it's even other people asking me, rather than just me asking myself all the time: *Why did I do this? Why did it catch on? Why did all this happen? Why do people around the world still find the idea of a Phone Booth in the desert so engaging?*

It could be that I'm not the best person to ask. To me it just seems obvious that a telephone booth in a remote desert location would be interesting. Is human nature not the same everywhere? Or maybe the Booth was merely the perfect sort of lark for people fed up with being viewed merely as demographics.

I'm not saying I know. I'm not the voice of any group. I'm only just barely the voice of a phone booth.

There might even be an onion-like quality to the Booth saga - all layers, no core. But if there was a core, for me that core was *fun*. Even if fun was only a layer, fun is a hell of a layer. Had I known from the beginning that killjoys would put an abrupt stop to the fun, I might have hesitated. Ha ha! Nah. I'd probably have gone ahead with it anyway. I do like to see how things work out, whether deep meaning is involved or not. And I'm always interested

in entertaining other peoples' ideas about the Booth's meaning.

> The Mojave Phone Booth was an accidental telemediated experience, a highly unusual physical and virtual destination for a few years until the Park Service removed it. [...] Callers and visitors describe achieving a sense of communitas, of dated and temporary belonging. (One caller is quoted: "It helps make people, people again!") The Mojave Phone Booth fulfilled the desire for connection, for community, for communication, without pretending to remove the gaps and differences between persons. Each call brought home the contrast between two spaces and two people, but that disparity became a subject of wonderment that propelled conversations forward. Simultaneous and heterogeneous networks grew over at least two forms of telecommunication, intersecting with and embedded in the physical world. These networks were temporary and ephemeral but not dystopian, contingent, and even vulnerable without aestheticizing the void.
>
> - Kevin Hamilton, "Absence in Common: An Operator for the Inoperative Community"

> Even without taking the receiver off the hook this lonely phone said something, the booth said something, the line strung all the way to the horizon through space humanized by only a single road said something. [...] One senses the poetry of this place because of what it makes possible and impossible. It connects to everything from the middle of nowhere. Its physical condition, "all its glass ... shot out" adds to the significance. It should be a container but it is not; the power of the environment seems irresistible. Here we sense a different kind of connectedness. Countless words are accessible through the line, but who would use this phone? It is a place of contradiction, tension, irony. It is not a place but many: the phone, the booth, the desert, the world. The world, suspended in space at the end of a wire, is completely accessible yet profoundly inaccessible - so the phone's very existence suggested ways in which communication is contradictory and paradoxical. The phone was disconnected in 2000 to protect the Mojave National Preserve, leading one pilgrim to protest: "The desert is an austere, breathtaking, fun and wonderful place but it will never be the same again for me again without a phone in the middle of nowhere, ringing, ringing, ringing."
>
> - Paul C. Adams, *Geographies of Media and Communication*

I don't know, that strikes me as maybe an overabundance of freighting. Can a desert phone booth have been built to carry so much? After all, it wasn't even built to carry a name.

At the same time, I'm not ready to agree with people who breezily write off the project, such as the person who expressed to me (or tried to) the following criticism: "the mojave booth project was surreal and without concrete meaning, with its origin arising more out of juvenile distraction." Another person likewise opined, "Your repetition compulsion either represents a zen-like quest for stillness in order get back in touch with exquisite subtleties in this shallow, fast-paced MTV culture ... or you might need medication." Others simply asked why it was worth thinking about a phone booth in a desert, rather than about, say, world hunger.

Fair enough.

I would say this, however: though food, and water, and shelter, and clothing become more important the less one has of them, they constitute the means of life, not the meaning of life. And once one has the means, one naturally turns to meanings.

But what does the Mojave Phone Booth have to do with the meaning of life?

Maybe nothing. Or not much. I wouldn't claim that the Booth held the key to the meaning of life, or even *a* meaning of life (nor even the meaning of a

life), but only that it might be representative of the inquisitiveness willing to examine all possibilities, turning especially toward overlooked or incongruous matters for clues toward larger understandings - maybe even something of those "exquisite subtleties" mentioned above.

Even if the Booth phenomenon itself were trivial, the question of why it attracted the interest of so many people still would not be. "You cannot always dissect a taste or a passion," wrote John C. Van Dyke in his much-loved classic *The Desert* (1901). I don't disagree with Van Dyke (despite his being such a wily hoaxter that most desert lovers who adore his book as I do *still* don't know it was a hoax), but I would add that my not being certain of the significance of the Booth doesn't mean it had none. Whether it was deeply and importantly significant or merely amusingly and superficially significant is for each to judge.

Finally, I'm inclined to suspect that any attempt to map the Booth's fame directly to an overt meaning is likely either to fall far short or go too far. At any rate, a grammar of Booth meaning, were such a thing even possible, would be beyond the scope of a book that's already longer than I thought it would be and beyond the ability of someone who took so long writing this much, BUT what the heck, I'll take a whack at offering an entirely non-definitive *because*.

> Deserts possess a particular magic, since they have exhausted their own futures, and are thus free of time. Anything erected there - a city, a pyramid, a motel - stands outside time.
>
> - J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*

I've talked in this book about the allure of deserts and the age-old human habit of layering meanings onto them. I've also mentioned many of the associated tensions that would occur or be felt by almost anyone contemplating the Booth, such as old (telephony) vs. new (Internet), individuals vs. collectives, wildness vs. civilization, aloneness vs. crowdedness, and so forth.

And I think another source of attraction is the very name itself, *Mojave Phone Booth*. One ought not to underestimate the power of certain names. There was a historically insignificant, back-shooting l9th-century outlaw whose groundless reputation as a dueling gunslinger has persisted to this day. His biographer concluded that there is but one reason Johnny Ringo is still remembered:

> I believe that he remains a western figure largely because of the mellifluous tonal quality of his name.
>
> *Ringo!*
>
> A name of its place and time and calling.
>
> A name that rings like a bell.

- Jack Burrows, *John Ringo*

The name *Mojave Phone Booth* also has a nice tonal quality and is "a name of its place and time and calling." (And it most definitely rang like a bell!)

But to me the heart of what is significant about the Mojave Phone Booth comes down to two words: *adventure* and *connection*.

Adventure

The first word of the title I gave this book is *Adventures*.

To some that might seem an exaggeration. During the Booth phenomenon, people sometimes compared the Booth to Disneyland, which I found telling. If I am exaggerating by calling my experiences with the Booth adventures, I would maintain that I am exaggerating in a different way than Disney is when it calls a theme park "California Adventure" or a ride "Expedition Everest" Is a visit to Disneyland in any meaningful sense an adventure?

Well, unless someone witnesses, say, one of the hushed-up gruesome accidental deaths that sometimes occur in The Happiest Place on Earth, you're not likely to hear an adult say, "You'll never guess what happened at Disneyland!" No one has to guess what happens at Disneyland. Everyone knows exactly what happens at Disneyland. That's the point of Disneyland - it's a managed experience. Within that expectation, Disneyland is unlikely to disappoint.

But you *will* likely be disappointed at Disneyland if you are the kind of person who prefers to manage your own experiences. Even so, Disneyland might be attractive to you in some alternative way, for example, as a place to subvert managed experiences. With the proper mind-set, any place - even Disneyland - can be a means of questioning basic assumptions or revising one's outlook.

Amusement parks are not designed for questioning assumptions or revising outlooks. One might even say that theme parks are specifically designed for the opposite of that. Should we choose to see the *a* in *amusement* as not a causal prefix but instead the alpha privative, amusement parks could then be described as places people go precisely *not* to muse, or think, or consider, serving instead as what one might call *anti-museums*.

In a way, we can say that people visiting theme parks don't do things so much as well-defined sets of carefully controlled events are made available to happen to them. The element of self-direction is one reason I would maintain that taking part in activities with an isolated Phone Booth in the middle of the California desert is magnitudes more of an adventure than Disney's California Adventure, let alone its "Expedition Everest."

But I'll go even further. How does the Booth experience compare to a real expedition to Mount Everest?

Before you scoff and close this book (and you're so close to the end!), hear me out. Let me be clear: I am *not* claiming a Mojave Phone Booth road trip is equivalent in adventure to an Everest expedition.

Not at all.

No, I'm claiming it could be even *more* of an adventure.

Yes, seriously.

Follow me, here. Suppose I set out to climb Mount Everest. While I can't know the precise details of what will happen, the range of possibilities of what might happen is not only clearly defined but fairly narrow. I might live or die; lose toes, fingers, a nose; I might summit uneventfully; I might fail to summit; I might falter and die and become one of Everest's many permanent corpsicles. Exactly which calamity or calamities, if any, will befall me for not knowing better than to try climbing to the roof of the world is a mystery, but whatever does befall me is unlikely to be anything unprecedented, or even unanticipated. Unless outer space aliens land atop Everest while I'm up there, nothing that happens during my Everest expedition is likely to have been an uncontemplated possibility, not even to someone who, as you've seen, plans as poorly as I do.

Now consider carefully this contrast: neither I nor anyone else foresaw the possibility of making a *telephone booth* world famous, nor could anyone have predicted any of the avalanche of effects that occurred as a result of the Booth's utterly improbable fame.

Obviously, I am not claiming to know what climbing Everest is really like, nor am I suggesting that dialing a phone number or visiting a telephone booth is commensurate in either level of effort or level of danger with scaling the tallest peak on the planet. What I am saying is that when I decided to engage this Phone Booth in the Mojave, I did not have, and could not have had, the slightest idea of what would happen.

And *that*, I submit, is the essence of adventure.

Grandma Prisbrey, near and dear to my heart for many reasons (not the least of which because she built a village out of bottles and named it Bottle Village), once said: "When I built this place, I didn't know what I was doin'. If I knew what was gonna happen, my God! I never would've built it." Yet she also spoke with obvious pride of Bottle Village's worldwide fame. "Now look what's happened to it!" she said. "My God, I'm known the world over. That's somethin'!" The many unforeseen consequences following from the Mojave Phone Booth Project taught me not only to understand but also to enjoy the tension between those two seemingly contradictory positions.

You Never Know What's Going to Happen When the Phone Rings

- Dennis Casebier

Legal notice: Any and all claims in the previous section are subject to be

rescinded in the event the author should ever actually scale Everest.

Connection

> A "hello world" program is a software program that prints out "Hello. world!" on a display device. It is used in many introductory tutorials for teaching a programming language and many students use it as their first programming experience in a language.
>
> - Wikipedia

"Hello, world" goes to the very core of what the Mojave Phone Booth Project's purpose turned out to be.

Most would say that the purpose of phone booths was to make or receive phone calls. But if we expand on that and instead describe their purpose as the making of connections, then I haven't heard of a phone booth that ever fulfilled that purpose any better than the Mojave Phone Booth.

> From: Royce 0.
> Subject: Simple Hello - Thanks
> Hello,
>
> I can't tell you how much this old senior has enjoyed your site and updates on the phone booth story. In this day and age we need to have somewhere to go and just enjoy. THANK YOU so much!!
>
> I have tried repeatedly to call the phone booth to no avail. However, I intend to keep on trying, who knows, maybe I'll meet a new friend at this last date in my life!!

A "Simple Hello" - that's all he wanted. Just a connection. My good pal LBJ (yes. those really are her initials) has a beautiful illustration of the Mojave Phone Booth tattooed on her leg. She never visited the Booth, nor ever even dialed its number. Her tattoo commemorates not the Booth itself but rather something it symbolizes, our friendship - our connection.

For me the Booth functioned, and still functions, as a sort of 20th-century update of the practice of leaving printed calling cards as introductions. It was and continues to be my introduction to people around the world. (Hello, world!) The Booth and I have ended up with a great many friends in common.

Even a little thing like its total destruction failed to put an end to the Booth's ability to create and foster connections. In 2014, the NPR radio program *Snap Judgment* produced a moving 17½-minute story about the Booth. After listening to it, I became a little sad all over again, thinking about the government's tearing down of the poor Booth. Ponyboy commiserated, saying. "I miss it. I don't like that it doesn't exist in the world anymore." But she cheered me up with an important observation: "Can't tear down a story."

Ponyboy is right. The Booth lives on as a story, for as long as anyone keeps telling it. No longer in physical existence, the Booth continues to make connections by means of its story. Almost a continent's width away from Arizona, a Florida woman named Sophia, late to work because the *Snap Judgment* radio story left her crying in her car, found and followed my Twitter

account named after the Booth. We ended up messaging and becoming super-close in a hurry. It's astounding, really - years and years after the Booth's destruction, it's still merrily doing its thing. As the connections live on, so the Booth lives on.

Can't tear down a story.

There's even an outside chance we might not have heard the last of the Booth's mortal remains. I received an email from someone called Dongo who claimed to have a piece of the Booth that he saved from a Vegas junkyard and promised to send to me. Although that was 2009 and I haven't heard from him since, I maintain hope. Sometimes one just kind of has to.

I realize this book is long. It could have been longer - it's always said that writers shouldn't censor themselves or self-edit while writing, so my first draft was 780 pages! Even at a more modest size, it feels to me like one of those extended late-night phone calls when one needs to get to sleep but doesn't want to hang up. So I'll leave you with a final thought.

Half a dozen years after the Booth's removal, I asked Charlie Wilcox whether he had found it tough to adjust to the Booth's absence. "Well, I still go out there," he said. "Last year's Christmas, I went out there, all by my lonesome. I walked around the phone pole a little bit and then come on back."

Something I often hear about the Booth and will probably hear from some who read this book is, "I always meant to call it" or "I always meant to visit it."

Whether you regard your adventures as small adventures or large adventures or not even adventures at all, do yourself a huge favor by doing those things you want to do while you can do them. You might not even know what they are. But maybe you do. What you don't know is when your opportunities will come to an end. Nor can you know what kind of connections will come of hypothetical adventures. To find out, you have to go and have them.

With projects such as Wagner, *Whip It!*, and the Booth, I discovered that some people were already my friends before we ever knew each other personally. And I can honestly say that I have a sense of knowing human beings better for having known the Mojave Phone Booth.

I know that will sound weird to some people, especially the sort who sometimes ask me what the big deal about the Booth was. "It was just a phone booth!" they say.

The Mojave Phone Booth was a phone booth, it's true.

But for a brief, magical time it was not *just* a phone booth.

I tell you, a funny thing has happened here.
- Grandma Prisbrey

Things happen on the desert, and they always will.
- Mary Lou Gulley, *My Mystery Castle*

Meanwhile, I'm *stillll* thinkin' ...
- Chuck Berry

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU ACCIDENTALLY MADE A REMOTE DESERT PHONE BOOTH WORLD-FAMOUS?

"... some strangely poetic business about this telephone booth."
–J. G. Ballard, author of *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*

The Mojave Phone Booth was one of the Internet's first viral phenomena, becoming a meme before most people knew what a meme was.

From the Introduction: "Within mere months of my going into the desert in search of it – and precisely *because* of its absurd remoteness – this forlorn and unsung desert artifact to which I had given the name Mojave Phone Booth would come to have friends and fans around the globe, to the extent that what had been almost certainly the world's most isolated telephone booth would be transformed almost overnight into the world's most celebrated telephone booth, appearing around the world in countless newspaper and magazine articles, and on TV and radio shows, inspiring websites, stories, songs, films, parodies, and more."

"The second greatest story ever told!"
– Larry Norman, gospel rock pioneer